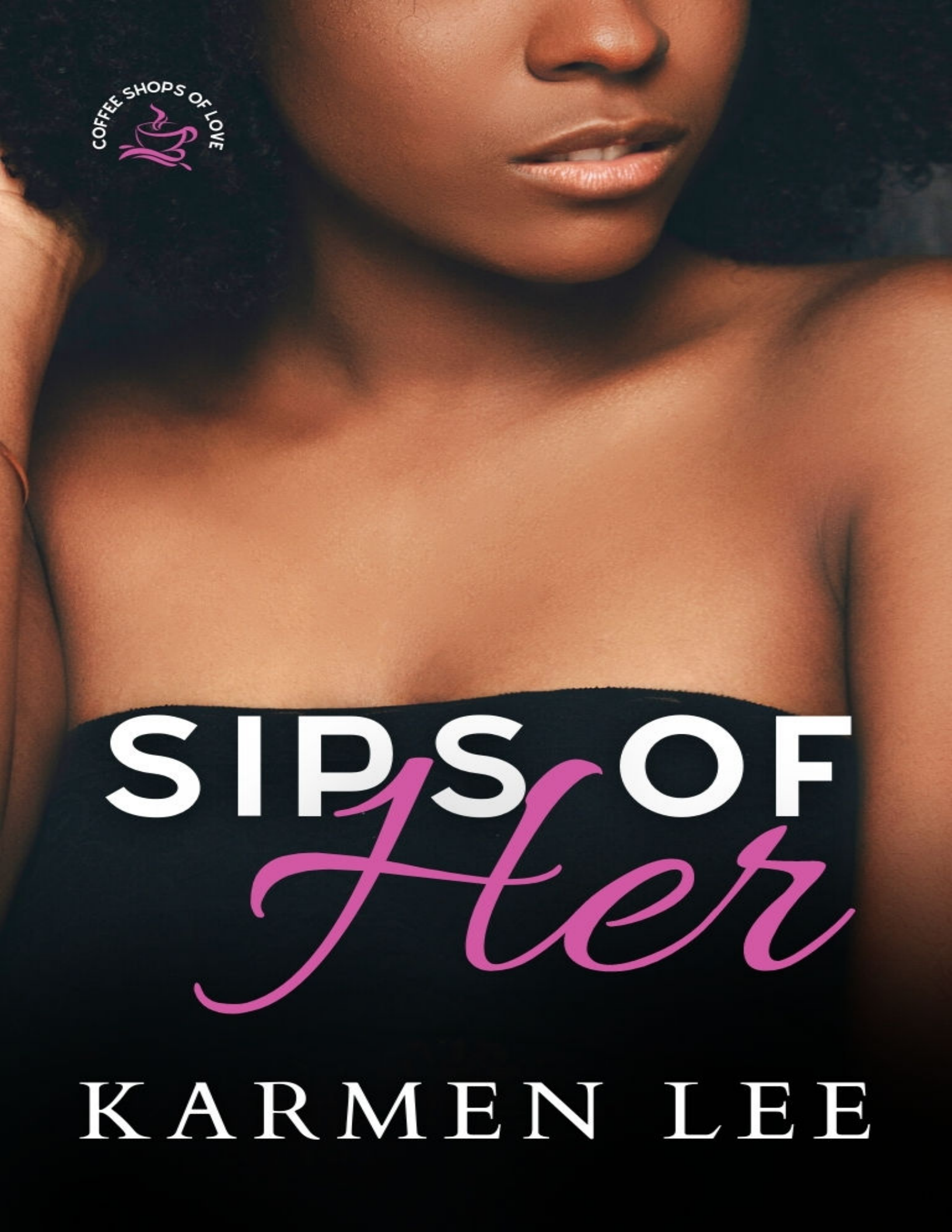
COFFEE SHOPS OF LOVE
SIPS OF
Her
KARMEN LEE

SIPS OF Her

Karmen Lee

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Author’s Note

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CONTENT NOTES

Here are a few notes for what you'll come across in this story. No spoilers intended, but just so you know what you are getting into. Feel free to skip ahead if you don't want to read over these warnings!

This read discusses coming out with unsupportive parents, depictions of anxiety/panic attacks, and has on-the-page sex scenes.

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To the ones who helped me choose love…

Thank you.

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Chapter One

Cameran

Today, I was going to woman the fuck up.

Well, more accurately, today I was going to talk to the customer who had captured my attention from the moment she first came into my café. I wasn't going to bitch out this time. I would actually speak to her…in full sentences.

I'd given myself a pep talk while getting dressed this morning, and even all my plants agreed. Today was the day to make a move. What that move would be, I still wasn't sure. The pep talk didn't include *how* I planned to do this, but I was good at thinking on my feet. I could think of something.

Right?

"Well, don't you look fancy. What's the occasion?"

"Fuck," I yelped, nearly spilling the pitcher of tea clutched in my hand. I shook my head and tried to breathe deeply to calm my racing heartbeat. I had lost track of time this morning and thought I had more time to myself, but a glance at the cow-shaped clock on the wall and Sean's knowing chuckle quickly dashed those hopes.

"I didn't hear you come in." I looked up with narrowed eyes. "And how many times have I told you not to creep up on me like that?"

He held his hands up in surrender even while his lips twisted into his familiar smirk. "Not my fault you were lost in La La Land again." Sean put his hands down and ducked under the counter. "I called out to you when I came in, but you didn't respond."

“I was...” I trailed off and waved my hand at the pitchers of coffee and tea on the counter. “Setting up for the morning rush and lost track of time.”

“Clearly.”

Despite my words, I wrapped my arms around Sean’s waist for my usual morning hug. The man was unpredictable at the best of times. To many, Sean’s free-wheeling ways left them underestimating him, a fact that he took advantage of with sometimes startling ruthlessness. As my best friend and business partner, he was the one who knew just how to keep me on track.

Love & Lattes was our baby, a joint-owned café we had opened three years ago after graduating from university together. Waking most days at three in the morning to open at five wasn’t easy, but both of us usually managed okay.

“I brought you a gift. Well, really, it’s from Rod, but he told me to pass it along on his behalf.”

Sean’s laughter rang out in the quiet of the shop, and he made grabbing motions with his hands.

“Hand over the goods, and no one gets hurt.”

I rolled my eyes and gestured to the backroom. “It’s in your locker. I promised him I wouldn’t peek at it, so it’s still wrapped up.”

He stepped away, and I turned back to my prep work. We only had thirty minutes before opening, and I still had a lot to set up. There were a few early-bird regulars who came in as soon as the Open sign lit up, and as much as I appreciated their business, they weren’t always the nicest when they needed their cups of caffeinated bliss.

“I don’t know why he didn’t just send it straight to you.”

I heard the door open and close behind me and snorted at the expected non-response. I couldn’t understand why Sean was being so weird about things. I knew he had a thing for my brother the same way I knew my brother had a thing for him. That neither of them would make a definitive move continued to vex me, especially when I was brought in to play the world’s most annoying game of telephone.

If not for how much I loved them both, I would have quit playing delivery girl years ago. But I desperately wanted them to finally work out, so I sucked it up and pretended like I didn’t already have my bridesmaid dress all picked out.

Pale pink and glittery. I would settle for nothing less.

Right on time, I felt my phone vibrate in the pocket of my apron, and I sighed before picking it up.

“Both of you are so annoying,” I said before Rod could speak. His chuckle was raspy, and I could tell he had woken himself up just to call. “I don’t know why you didn’t just send it to him directly.”

“Because he refuses to give me his new address.” I could hear soft whines in the background. “It’s not time for outside, Millie girl.”

“Don’t mistreat my doggy niece. I will show up at your house.”

“Oh, I know you will,” he agreed easily. “Though if you managed to wrestle Sean onto the plane with you, I’d be fine with that.”

“Not a chance,” Sean called out as he walked back in. He slipped his apron over his head. “I am a Southern belle through and through. You can keep your rain and twinkly vampires on the West Coast.”

I giggled, shaking my head. “I have to agree with him, Roddie. Atlanta is home, and I don’t think I would make it in Washington. Too much competition and too little sun for my taste.”

“Well, I don’t plan on being out here forever. You ready to host me when I do make my way back, Sean?”

I raised my eyebrows and gave Sean a look. His chestnut cheeks were slightly flushed, and I couldn’t help but smile. He was normally the quick one, always ready with a sarcastic phrase or witty comeback. Now though, he looked hopeful, something else I had been noticing more and more when Rod was involved.

Sean looked up at me and wrinkled his nose when he saw my expression.

“Sure thing, sugarbear. But make sure you’re ready to put a ring on it.”

Rod laughed. “You said it, not me.” I heard him yawn over the line. “I’d better get a few more hours of sleep before I have to get ready for work.”

“Alright, Roddie. Love you.”

“Love you both. Have a great day.”

When the phone clicked off, I put my hands on my hips and turned my attention to Sean. “Seriously?”

He kept setting up like he was unaffected. “What?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but my ‘fifteen minutes to opening’ alarm interrupted my words. I clicked it off before pointing a finger at him.

“This isn’t over.”

Sean waved me off. “You’d better get ready.” I could see him glancing at me from the corner of his eye, and I noticed his cheeks were still rosy. I made a note to myself to bring it up over a bottle of wine before conceding.

“We will talk about this,” I hissed, but I turned my attention back to the pitchers on the counter. I wanted to say something that would magically bring those two fools together, but since I couldn’t even manage my own dating life, I was drawing a blank. Being single at twenty-five wasn’t a big deal to me.

Being single at twenty-five and having never been in a real relationship shouldn’t have been either, and yet...

Another alarm going off pushed me to work faster, and Sean and I settled into our normal morning waltz of him setting out the bakery items and me preparing for the morning delivery. Five came soon enough, as did the first line of regulars. The morning pattern was a habit now and one I could do with my eyes closed. By seven, the first part-timer, Alicia, had arrived, and coffee deliveries were underway.

I loved this—the flow of community, from students on their way to early morning classes to the salarymen and women who grabbed coffee and breakfast for themselves and their office mates. *Love & Lattes’* location on the first floor of an office building meant many of the customers were regulars, making it relatively easy to guess the orders as they came in.

“Hey, Julie. You’re looking great today,” I called out, pulse jumping as the familiar woman walked up to the counter. Her dark head was bowed as she looked down at her phone. I tucked a curl behind my ear and hoped I didn’t have any coffee stains on my blouse already. Normally I didn’t care about potential messes on me. It was inevitable that something would spill. No one would ever say anything if I did, but ever since Julie had started coming in in the mornings, I had tried to look nicer. It never seemed to matter, though, since the other woman barely looked my way.

She rarely ever did.

I swallowed against the lump in my throat and forced the smile to stay on my face. It had been a shot in the dark anyway. I didn’t even know if Julie liked women. Chances were she didn’t, and she was being kind by

ignoring my awkward attempts at drawing her into conversation. That was probably better than her loudly and angrily telling me to back off. That had never happened to me before, but I couldn't help but imagine the absolute worst-case scenario.

Rod always told me doing that meant I was prepared.

Sean said it was because I was morbid as fuck. His words, not mine.

"Good morning," she replied finally, her hooded dark brown eyes looking up at the menu above me. I tried not to tap my fingers on the counter as I waited. I didn't do well with silences, though I'm sure it was only awkward on my end. I could feel the need to say something bubbling up like Mentos in a Coke bottle.

"Let me get—"

"Americano. Extra shot with soy and hazelnut."

Damnit.

I wanted to slap a hand over my wayward mouth, but the words were already out. I stood frozen to my spot as her umber gaze slowly fell on me. It wasn't the first time she had glanced my way, but it was the first time it felt like I had all her attention on me, and now, I didn't know what to do with it.

"You memorized my order?"

"Um," I started, not sure how to explain that yes, I had memorized her three most common drink orders. *That's not weird, right? I'm a barista, so that's like part of my job.* "Yes?"

She raised an elegantly arched eyebrow, and her lips turned up slightly. "Is that an answer or a question?"

"Both?" I mentally kicked myself for phrasing it like another question. *Be cool, Cameran. You can do this. You talk to pretty people all the time.* "Did I get it right?"

Julie nodded. "Yes. Though I suppose I should try to not be so predictable."

"I don't think you're predictable," I blurted out before I could stop my mouth from talking again.

"No?"

I shook my head. "I tend to remember people's orders when they come in regularly. And you come in most mornings, and I say hello. I'm usually the one at the counter when you're here. So, I usually take your

order and sometimes make it. And hand it to you." *Oh God, stop talking.* "So…yeah."

She blinked slowly. "Ah, I see. I guess it is part of your job to be able to predict what people want to order." The slight smile that had been on her face fell, and something in me cried out, bereft of its presence. I thought quickly, trying to figure out how to get back the almost-friendly vibe we'd had going.

"But, if you ever decide to change your order, I could probably guess that too." *Is this flirting? Am I flirting right now?* Inner me was torn between being impressed and being terrified.

I could see Sean looking at me from where he was manning the espresso machine, and I tried not to fidget. I didn't worry about him telling me not to flirt with the customers. Knowing him, he would probably tell me to flirt harder and draw in more business. I'd swear some of the businessmen that came in probably only did so to get a glimpse of his charming smile. Still, as much as I teased him about flirting with my brother, I didn't want that turned on me.

"Is that so?"

I nodded at the challenge in her tone.

"Interesting," she responded simply before handing over her card. Our fingers brushed, and I tried to appear unruffled when really, I wanted to reach out and say 'again' just to feel that spark. I felt a stab of disappointment when our fingers remained apart when I handed her the card back.

"Um…" I said, trying to think of a way to keep her in front of me longer. She turned expectant eyes toward me. "It says Ji-hyun on your card?"

She nodded. "That's my Korean name."

"Oh. That's…cool." I drummed my fingers against the counter as I thought about what else to say to keep the conversation going. "So, why Julie?"

She shrugged. "My dad's family chose my English name, and mom's side chose the Korean name. Same for my sister and brother."

"That makes sense. And they do sound similar. Do you have a preference of which one people use?"

Julie shook her head. "Not really. I'm fine with whichever people pronounce correctly, which tends to be my English name. Mostly only my

mom’s side calls me Ji-hyun, though, I have had some people tell me to use my Korean name exclusively since I, and I quote, ‘don’t look *that* Black.’” When I frowned, she shrugged again. “The struggles of being biracial. Genetics and all that.”

“Well, I think it’s cool, having two names.” Internally I winced at my choice of words. *Cool? Could I be any worse at this?* To keep from spouting off some other insipid comment, I quickly aborted the mission I had barely even started. Clearly, I needed a better plan. “We’ll have your order ready for you in a bit.”

Julie nodded, giving me one final hint of a smile before moving away, and it took everything in me to focus on the next customer in line and not the way her pants molded to her long legs or how her suit jacket draped across her shoulders just right. Her inky black hair looked almost purple in the light of the shop, and it fell in soft waves over her shoulders, stopping midway down her back. I wondered if it would feel as silky as it looked as it fell like water around my fingers. Every time she came in, I found myself trying not to stare, and I was surprised she hadn’t caught on. Subtlety wasn’t exactly my specialty.

Which is why she’s probably not even close to being interested.

With a sigh, I pushed thoughts of Julie out of my head. I had a line full of caffeine-craving customers and no time to lament my amateur flirting skills toward someone who was probably straight anyway.

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Chapter Two

Julie

"So, you went there again."

I paused when I heard that voice and quickly glanced around, wondering if there was a way for me to get out of this conversation before it truly started. A glance at the window did me no good. We were too high up for that to be a viable option, and the windows didn't open anyway.

Fuck. I should have finished the damn thing and tossed it before I got here.

I cursed myself for my lack of planning—no doubt brought on by getting lost in my thoughts of a certain gorgeous barista. Maybe I could make a run for it. I might lose a few cool points with my other coworkers, but once I explained why I was high-tailing it to safety, they would completely understand.

"You try to run, and I will tackle you to the floor in front of everyone."

I turned slowly, calculating whether that particular brand of embarrassment was worth it or not. It was still early enough in the morning that there were only a few people in the office. They might put the whole thing down to a morning mirage.

"You wouldn't dare," I replied, pressing my luck as I faced the bane of my existence in the form of my best friend, Hailey Clarke. Her brown eyes were locked on me, and her lips quirked up in a familiar smirk. I didn't doubt then that the asshole would do it, dressed in a skirt or not.

"Try me."

I narrowed my eyes, hand tightening on the item that had started this tense exchange. We stared at one another in a battle of wills, unmoving

even as the quiet sounds of the morning slowly floated around us. There were no offices for me to duck into in this hallway, and the only door available was to the locked supplies closet. What little I remembered from learning taekwondo as a kid meant I could probably outmaneuver her enough to slip away, but I didn't doubt she would purposefully make enough noise to draw attention to us anyway.

With a groan of defeat, I once again gave in. Rarely did I ever win a battle of wills against this hellion, and today was not going to be the day for my luck to change.

"I knew I should have taken the morning off."

Her whoop of laughter could've started a riot, and she swiftly marched up to me with a knowing grin.

"You sly fox. I thought you said you weren't going to go back until you had the confidence to actually give the lady in charge a proper hello."

"It's not about confidence, Hailey." At her scoff of disbelief, I rolled my eyes and willed the unwarranted heat in my face to abate. I didn't need my cheeks to let everyone else know how I was feeling. Getting rosy-cheeked at the first sip of alcohol was embarrassment enough.

"So, did you nut up and talk to her?"

I took a sip from my cup as I racked my brain for what to say that wouldn't make me seem as cowardly as I was. My silence was telling, and it didn't take Hailey long to pick up on it.

"Oh no," she said, her eyebrows raising. She put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. "You chickened out, didn't you?"

"I didn't *completely.*" I breathed deep as I recalled the moment I stepped foot in the cafe.

Love & Lattes had intrigued me from day one, if only for the fact that the cups were the cutest damn things I had ever seen. The one mug I had on my desk had been purchased there, and the smiling cow with pink heart-shaped spots always brought a smile to my face.

"Define completely."

I sighed. "I talked to her."

"Placing an order doesn't count."

"I did more than place an order," I insisted. Hailey's expression let me know she still didn't believe me. "I promise. We actually had a conversation. It wasn't a long conversation, but it counts."

She pursed her lips and looked me up and down in that way that always made me want to squirm. It was similar to the look my mom gave me when she was trying to decide whether she believed something I said or not, and I didn't appreciate being analyzed so early in the fucking morning.

"Fine. I'll give you that one." She pointed a finger at me. "But we are not done discussing this. It's been months, and you still don't even have the woman's number."

"Yeah, well..." I trailed off, not knowing what to say to that. She wasn't wrong, but every time I thought of asking for it, I got tongue-tied. I had never had this much of an issue when it came to talking to women. I didn't have a different woman hanging off my arm every night or anything, but I managed to keep my bed warmed when the need struck me. My hesitation at pulling the trigger now left me scratching my head.

"How you ever managed to date before, I will never understand."

Hailey curled a pale arm around mine and guided us back toward our offices. More people were walking in, so I knew it was time to get to work. We paused in front of her office, and her arm slid away.

"We will get you past this ridiculous hump of singledom one way or another." I chuckled and shook my head.

"I don't know why you're so determined to fix me up with someone. I'm not exactly hurting for bed partners."

"Because you're my best friend, and I want us to actually go on double dates again, not just talk about which woman you hooked up with and how it just wouldn't work out with her for whatever reason."

I snorted. The double dates we had gone on with my ex-girlfriend had usually ended with arguments and me trying to calm both parties while Hailey's long-term boyfriend, Leon, stood back with his hands up. I couldn't blame him. Hailey was a handful on the best of days and probably would have turned around and shot him a new asshole for interfering.

"You hated our double dates before."

Hailey wrinkled her nose. "No, I hated your girlfriend before. There's a difference."

I shook my head and continued down the hallway. "I'll call you for lunch."

I nodded to the few people I passed who were settling in for the morning but didn't stop to talk. Getting to my own office was a relief, and I sank down into my chair with a sigh. My gaze fell on the cow mug, and I

couldn’t help but smile. I brushed a finger over the pink handle and internally kicked myself again for not just going for it and asking for Cameran’s phone number.

“Hi, Cameran. Would you like to go out with me?” I muttered under my breath, cringing at how juvenile that sounded. “Hey, Cam. You’re cute. Want to go out…with me?”

Fuck. That sounds even worse.

I didn’t have the faintest clue how to even start the conversation, especially not in front of other customers. How would she have responded? Was she even into women? These were all questions I didn’t have answers to, and it left me frozen with indecision. I didn’t understand what it was that drew me to her.

Maybe it was the way she had seemed so damn different from me when I first saw her, with her bubblegum pink hair that reminded me of the sweetest cotton candy. It was black now, but the color had done its job and captured my attention. Today, it had been pulled up into two puffs of soft-looking clouds on the sides of her head, and it took everything in me not to reach out and touch. If not for the swift ass-kicking I got when I was a kid and reached out without asking to touch one of my cousin’s hair who had a similar texture, I might not have known how to act.

A knock on my door drew my attention, and I straightened when I saw it was my boss. His lips were parted in a smile, but his dark eyes held no warmth as he gazed at me. Jameson Dummond wasn’t a bad boss. He was fair and didn’t micromanage if you did your job. Still, his way of looking at you sometimes was enough to make you feel like you had done something wrong, and I had no desire to be perceived as unproductive.

“Good morning, Julie. Checking in about those reports from last week on the Senacca project. How’s it coming along?”

“Oh, great, sir.” I opened the drawer to my right and ran my fingers along the tops of the folders until I came to the correct one. I had printed the information he needed on Friday, before leaving, just in case he came in today. *Good thing I was prepared.*

“The data team is reviewing the numbers and should be sending me an update by end of day Wednesday.”

I tried to keep my hand from trembling as I held the file out to him. He approached slowly, gaze still firmly on me until he reached the edge of my desk. He glanced down and took the papers.

“Perfect. Good work,” he said, not looking up from the papers as he shuffled them in his hands. I folded my hands and placed them on top of the desk, trying to exude calm. It felt like a lifetime before the swish of paper stopped, and he looked back up. “How are you doing? Settling in okay?”

I nodded. “Definitely. Everyone has been great to work with.”

“Glad to hear it. You let me know if anything changes.”

“Absolutely.” *Not.*

He flashed a sharp smile before pivoting on his heel and walking back toward the door. I didn’t trust myself to let out even a breath until he was out of my office and on his way down the hall.

My shoulders dropped, and I blinked slowly. I had to get it together. I was on new-hire probation for another month, and I couldn’t afford to not be seen as an asset. Project management wasn’t my dream, but it sure paid enough to make me want to do it well. I couldn’t afford to blow it, not unless I wanted to spend the rest of my life listening to my parents lament having a failure for a daughter.

I sighed and brushed a strand of hair behind my ear. My gaze fell back on the cow mug, and my mood plummeted further. I had to get my shit together. So, I had a crush. It wasn’t the first time I found someone attractive that I knew I couldn’t have, and I doubt it would be the last. I didn’t have the time to let my wayward feelings distract me.

I had a plan for my future, and it didn’t include a gorgeous barista with the sweetest fucking smile.

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Chapter Three

Cameran

"I need a vacation," I muttered as I bent over to stretch out my spine. The day had been a long one. A stream of customers had come in for lunch around noon, leaving us to take breaks when we could fit them in.

Sean grunted from beside me. "Yes." He glared at me. "Now do you believe me when I say we need to hire another full-time employee?"

I sighed, not because I didn't want to hire one. If anything, today had shown that we needed another pair of hands desperately—if only to make sure everyone was able to take a break when needed. I mostly hated to admit that Sean had been right about something. I knew once I did, he would hold it over me until he got bored and decided to bother me about something else. Sometimes it felt like I had two brothers instead of one.

Maybe I shouldn't try to get him and Rod together. I can only handle so much at once, and I don't need them both ganging up on me like they used to.

I groaned. "Ugh. You're probably right." I made a mental note to review our old Help Wanted ad to update it. "There has been a noticeable uptick in the number of people coming in lately."

"A new office building opened up a couple streetlights down."

I raised my eyebrows. This was the first time I was hearing this information. "Well, hell, no wonder. When did this happen? I don't remember hearing about a new building being constructed."

He waved a hand at me as he reached under the counter and grabbed his water jug. I grabbed my own cup and took a large sip. The coolness of the water helped decrease the temperature of my face. The air conditioner was running, but it still got more than a little heated behind the counter.

It was a little after four in the afternoon, which meant we had less than two hours before we closed and headed home. Normally, we would get a final small rush of commuters needing a last-minute pick-me-up before they contended with the traffic home, but it would be nothing like the madness of the morning. With each tick closer to six, I could feel myself relaxing a little more. I loved my business, but after being on my feet for almost twelve hours, I was looking forward to take-out and sinking into the soothing embrace of my couch.

"I'm going to start cleaning up what I can before the final rush," I said, pushing away from the counter.

"Before you do that, we need to have a chat about this morning."

I frowned. "This morning?"

"Yes."

"What about it?"

Sean raised an eyebrow at me. "Really? You thought I wouldn't notice you trying to eye-fuck the Blasian cutie in the suit?"

My pulse jumped, and I immediately knew who he was talking about. I tried to play it off, but I knew by his smug expression that he wasn't buying my denials.

"Lots of guys wear suits, Sean."

"Sis, we both know you don't do penis, so let's not." Kerri, our afternoon part-timer, barked out a laugh loud enough to draw attention from the few customers working at the tables in the lobby. I frowned, but she just smiled and continued stacking cups.

"I really have no idea who you're talking about, Sean." *Lies.* "We had a lot of customers in today, so you have to be more specific." *More lies.*

He rolled his eyes. "Playing clueless only works if you actually are, and we both know you know exactly who I'm talking about. Ms. Tall, Tan, and Totally Your Type. That description ringing any bells for you?"

"You're ridiculous." I grabbed a rag and wiped down the already-clean counter. "I don't have a type."

"So, you wouldn't date her then?" He hummed, and I tried not to look over at him. "She is a bit more femme than I thought you would go for."

"Being femme doesn't mean I wouldn't date Julie," I replied indignantly. "I don't have a preference one way or another, and she's gorgeous no matter what she wears."

“Ha,” he huffed. “So, you do know who I’m talking about.”

I froze. *Damnit.* “You did that on purpose.”

Sean shrugged his grin, not looking the least bit repentant. “I didn’t say you were the only smart one. And anyway, the only thing ridiculous is you not making a move already.”

“I can’t make a move on our customers,” I countered. “It’s unprofessional.”

He snorted. “I don’t know who decided that rule, but I will not be following it.”

I tried to figure out what to say that would logically make sense and distract from the fact that I was just a coward who couldn’t figure out how to make my mouth work around beautiful women. Especially beautiful women with legs for days and a smile that made my legs turn to fucking Jell-O.

“Well, I do. Say we did go out, and it was disastrous. Then we would lose out on that business.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” He turned to Kerri. “Kerri, hon, can you solve a dilemma for us?”

Kerri nodded and paused stacking. “Sure.”

“Great. If you found one of our customers attractive, would you ask for their number?”

Her blue eyes widened, and she glanced over at me before quickly looking back at Sean. “Um, maybe?”

I smiled in glee at my point being bolstered until Sean kept going. “Why maybe? What would hold you back from asking them out?”

She frowned. “Well, if they didn’t seem to like me back, I probably wouldn’t ask. If they were a little flirty or at least didn’t blow off my flirting, I would probably take a chance if I felt strongly enough about it.”

I wrinkled my nose at the cackle Sean let out. Kerri gave me a lopsided smile before moving away to restock the rest of the counter. Sean looked at me, eyebrows raised.

“Now what you got to say?”

I scowled. “No.”

“Give me one good reason why.”

“Will you leave it alone then?”

He snorted. “Probably not, but you can always hope.”

I sighed and looked at the ceiling, praying for patience. He didn't move away, brown eyes still locked on me as he waited for my response.

Truthfully, I didn't have one, at least not one that didn't expose how terrified I was of rejection. I wasn't good at this romance stuff. I always seemed to catch on that someone was flirting days after the fact, and by then, it was too late, and they were already engaged to their new future Mrs.

I deflated, hunching over when I decided to just go for the truth. "I am the worst lesbian ever."

Sean patted me on the shoulder. "No, you aren't the worst. You just need some practice."

"Practice?" I didn't know what he was getting at. How the hell was I supposed to practice being a lesbian? It wasn't like there was a manual somewhere.

Was there?

~*~*~

"Sean, what are we doing here?" I had to yell just to hear myself over the music, and if not for the fact that he was right beside me, I doubt Sean would have heard me at all.

"We are here to get you used to talking to women."

"I talk to women all the time."

He gave me a look. "You talk to customers all the time. There's a difference. Plus, I saw how you were the last time that girl came in, and you were so awkward, even I was in pain."

"Thanks," I muttered. I couldn't help how my mouth never acted right when Julie came in. The last couple exchanges had been too brief for my taste, and I hadn't been able to joke again like I had on Monday. "But that still doesn't explain why we had to come to a bar."

He pulled me along until we managed to squeeze in at the bar. Sean raised a hand and got the bartender's attention. The man was eyeing Sean up and down and made no moves to hide it. I was surprised when Sean flashed a grin that I recognized as his 'get lucky' smile.

"Are you really trying to screw the bartender?"

His smile didn't dip, but he did cut his eyes at me. "No, fool. I'm trying to get us a discount on drinks." He turned his attention back to the

bartender, and I sighed and turned away.

I hadn't wanted to come out at all. My Friday nights were usually spent curled up with a book or watching another episode of Criminal Minds. I wasn't a fan of clubs where you could hardly hear yourself think or bars where the soles of your shoes stuck to the floor. I knew Sean went clubbing a few times a month, but we had an unspoken rule that he only called me if he needed a pickup, and he would pay me for my services in food. I wasn't thrilled to be out when I could be at home in my comfy pants helping to solve crimes in my head.

"Here."

I turned back in time to have a drink thrust into my hands. "What is this?"

"Margarita. Relax, Cami. I'm trying to get you to loosen up, not pass out in a drunken puddle."

I took a sip, shivering slightly at the chilly tart liquid. I didn't drink much, and my alcohol tolerance was lower than hell. Finishing this drink would probably have me hating life tomorrow. Still, I knew Sean meant well, so I dutifully took another sip and let my gaze wander.

The bass throbbed, forcing my heart to beat to its rhythm. The air was thick and awash with perfumes and colognes that had my head spinning. It was all too loud and too much. I didn't enjoy places like this where the push and pull of noise and people left no room for me to breathe.

"You okay?" Sean's expression was concerned as he looked down at me. "We don't have to stay. I just wanted you to get out and about for once."

I wanted to say no, I wasn't okay, but I pushed the bubble of panic down and tried to smile.

"It's fine." I swallowed hard and looked over to the dance floor. It writhed like a living thing, bodies swaying and gyrating to the beat. "But I will not be going over there, just so we're clear."

"Girl, I wouldn't ask you to go that far."

Relief flowed over me, and I followed Sean over to one of the available tables. We stood, both glancing around as people walked by in pairs and groups. It had been years since I set foot in a club, and this reunion reminded me why. I didn't understand how he thought this was going to work. There was no way in hell I had any desire to walk up to some random woman and attempt to flirt with her.

I didn’t want to be rejected in front of a few people I knew, so I really wasn’t trying to be rejected in front of a strange crowd. Plus, it would be just my luck that someone filmed it and put it on social media for clicks and likes. I was not trying to become a hashtag.

“Oh my God.”

My pulse jumped. “What?” I looked around, not seeing anything different from how the place looked a minute ago. I turned back to Sean. He was staring straight ahead, and I followed his gaze. “What happened?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Just my exes making out on the dance floor.”

“Like with each other?”

“Ugh. That’s so tacky.”

I found myself not knowing what to comment. I had only met one of Sean’s ex-boyfriends because the others never lasted long. “Which ones are they?”

He turned his back to the dance floor. “Unimportant. Both were pure drama.”

I choked on a snort as I swallowed more of my drink. I gave him an incredulous look, disbelief coating my words. “They were drama? Sean, you live for that stuff.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “There is only room for one dramatic partner in my relationships, and that will always be me.”

I giggled, but he wasn’t wrong. It’s part of why I thought he and Rod would be so perfect for one another. Rod was enough of a rock to keep Sean grounded. If there was anyone who could put up with Sean’s mercurial moods and simultaneously give him a run for his money in matching wits, it would be Rod.

“I don’t know why you go for people you know are dramatic.”

He sighed loud enough for me to hear. “Because they make such good bed partners.”

I shook my head. “If you say so.”

We lapsed back into silence, and I knew tonight would be a wash. Even if I did have the courage to walk up and talk to any of the women here, none of them were the one I actually liked. It wouldn’t be fair to talk to someone just to practice for talking to someone else. That would be cruel.

I put my half-empty glass on the table. “Sean, I think I’m going to head home.”

He didn’t look at me when answering. “You sure you want to do that?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because your crush is over at the bar.”

“What?”

Sean winced when my question came out shriller than I had planned. I froze.

What do I do now? Do I turn around and look?

I widened my eyes and glanced over at him. “Oh, God. What do I do? Should I turn around and look at her? Should I go say hi?”

He nonchalantly sipped his drink, and I envied his ability to stay calm while I lost my shit. He set his drink down and smirked.

“Well, whatever you plan to do, you better decide fast. She’s coming over this way.”

What?

I whirled around, not caring when my drink sloshed over the rim of the glass, splashing over my hands. My eyes widened when I realized Sean wasn’t lying. I could have picked Julie out of a crowd anywhere, and seeing her now was like a shock to my system.

Her legs were encased in skintight dark jeans, and I envied her long strides as she made her way over to us. Any thought I might have had that she was coming this way for another reason was thrown out the window when we locked gazes. There was familiarity there and something else. The sleeveless shirt she wore was tucked in and buttoned up, save the last two or three buttons that left a tantalizing strip of lightly tanned skin visible. It was that free skin that had my attention as she reached us.

“Julie. Hi,” I breathed out. “It’s good to se—”

“I am so sorry for this, but please play along.”

“What?”

Soft lips answered me, and I let out an involuntary gasp. It wasn’t my first kiss, but it was close to it, and I was unsure of how to respond. I felt her lips pause, and then my confusion switched to panic. I didn’t understand what was going on, but I knew I didn’t want it to stop.

Decision made. I threw myself into the kiss, lifting onto my toes to meet her lips more fully.

The shift was electric. Hands gripped my hips tightly, pulling me in until we were pressed together thigh to thigh. I brought my arms up to wrap around her neck as our mouths slotted more perfectly together like puzzle pieces. I moaned softly, unable to keep the sound of pleasure from escaping my lips.

Kissing had never felt like this.

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Chapter Four

Julie

Fingers gripped at the nape of my neck, and I shivered. This wasn't what I had planned for the evening. When Hailey had suggested a night out, I knew she had been hoping it would help me get over the same woman I was now coaxing kisses from. What hadn't been planned was running into my ex-girlfriend, Claire, and her new girlfriend. I had taken one good look at them before attempting to make an escape.

Clearly, I was too slow at a lot of things.

Being caught in awkward conversation with them was like having water dripped on you drop by drop until you screamed. Claire's smug mention of me third-wheeling it with Hailey had caused something in me to snap. I didn't know what I was planning until, like for Moses, the throngs of people parted like the Red Sea, and I saw my salvation in two familiar puffs framing the sweet face I continued to see in my dreams. The only thing sweeter was now sampling from the same lips that had caused me to lose myself in fantasy more than once.

A sharp tug on my hair brought me back to the present, and as the sounds of the club around us filtered back in, I knew I had to think fast. I leaned in for one more final soft kiss before pulling back slightly to look down.

Cameran's lips were puffy and slick, and I wanted to reach out and brush my fingers across them to feel their heat. I forced that desire away as thoughts turned over in my head.

Think. You have to save this.

"I'm sorry," I replied. I leaned in, not to kiss her again but to keep the conversation between us. I had never been this close to her before, and I

hadn’t realized she was so much shorter than me from behind the counter. Her presence had always made her seem so much larger, but she was the perfect height to bury my face against her hair. How I managed not to, God only knows.

Cameran’s hold shifted until she was clutching at my shoulders. Her eyes were dark in the dim light of the club as she stared at me with twin pools I would love to drown in. Her mouth parted twice before she finally spoke.

“It's okay.” Her voice was quiet, barely audible over the noise of the DJ.

“It’s not,” I insisted. I didn’t want her to think I just randomly went around kissing people without at least asking first. I wasn’t normally like this, and now I could only hope that she wouldn’t think I was an asshole and ban me from her café. “But I couldn’t think of what else to do because of my—”

“Jules, aren’t you going to introduce us?”

I closed my eyes at the sound of Claire’s voice. I could tell by her tone that it wasn’t actually a question. I felt a frisson of smugness that she clearly even cared. I didn’t want her back, but I couldn’t help but be petty since she had been the one to call it quits.

Deep breath in. You can do this.

Letting go of Cameran’s hips was a struggle, but I peeled my fingers away, wrapping an arm around her waist instead.

“Cameran, this is Claire. Claire, this is my girlfriend, Cameran.”

Beside me, I felt Cameran stiffen, and I mentally kicked myself for not asking her first if this was okay.

What the fuck am I thinking? She might not even date women.

When Cameran reached out to take Claire’s hand, I relaxed slightly. Surely Cameran wouldn’t be offering to shake Claire’s hand if she wasn’t going to play along. I widened my eyes when Hailey and Leon walked over. Hailey’s expression seemed torn between annoyance and amusement as she looked at Claire and then back at me.

“Well, this is one hell of a reunion.”

Understatement of the fucking century, I thought to myself.

“I’ll say,” Claire agreed, her smile going sharp. I felt my heartbeat jump, and I almost said, ‘fuck it.’ There was nothing wrong with making a

strategic retreat. While the guys introduced themselves to one another, I tried to discreetly scope out an escape route.

A hand gripped mine suddenly, pulling my attention back, and I turned to see Cameran observing me. Her lips were still damp, drawing my eye and reigniting the want that had coursed through me moments ago.

"Are you alright?"

Cameran's voice was still pitched low but probably not low enough to not be heard by everyone else. I pulled my arm from around her waist and reached down to lace my fingers with hers.

"I am now." It could have been a line, but it was still the truth. I wasn't ecstatic about running into my ex, but I had known it would happen eventually. I lifted our hands and brushed a kiss over the back of Cameran's hand.

"So, where did the two of you meet?"

I glanced at Claire's girlfriend and blanked when I realized I didn't remember her name. Kelsey? Chelsea?

"Oh, we met at my coffee shop."

Relief flooded my chest at hearing her speak up, but I knew I needed to figure out a way out of this before we got asked other questions we didn't have answers for. Cameran was a good sport for trying to do this with me, but I didn't want to take advantage any more than I already had.

"Well, it was good to see you, Claire," I said, trying to break things up. "But we should get going."

"Oh, wait," her girlfriend said, pointing at Cameran. "Do you own that coffee shop over near Peachtree downtown?"

I frowned. That was a weirdly specific question that had my thoughts racing, but beside me, Cameran just laughed like it was a question she got often. Hell, it might be. I barely knew anything about her.

"Which one?" She squeezed my hand gently. Claire's smile shifted, and it put me on alert. I didn't know what was going on behind those gray eyes, but I was fairly sure I wasn't going to like it.

Hailey jumped into the conversation then, saving me from having to say anything. "Are you guys ready to head out? I could use something to eat."

"Yeah, that sounds great," I hastily replied. I didn't want the conversation to go any further and turned to Cameran before Claire could

say anything more. “You ready to go, babe, or did you want to hang around for a bit longer?”

Cameran gazed up at me, dark eyes unreadable, and for a moment, a bubble of anxiety welled up in me.

What if she wanted to stay?

What then?

I couldn’t force her to leave with me, but the thought of staying brought moisture to my palms. I would do it to keep up the fucked-up charade I had initiated, but I knew I would be sweating buckets by the end of it.

“No, I’m ready to go.” She turned to look back at the table where her friend still stood with Leon. “Are you ready, Sean?”

His lips were turned up in a smirk, but his eyes were trained on me. I was sure he would have some choice words about me for commandeering his friend without so much as a ‘hello’ thrown his way. I had seen him behind the counter at the café and had even spoken to him once or twice when it was him at the register instead of Cameran.

Oh, shit. A thought came to me suddenly. *Are they together? I thought they were just coworkers but…*

I hadn’t even thought about it before kissing Cameran. They had never seemed anything other than friendly to one another the times I was in the coffee shop, but that was their work. If they were dating, of course, they wouldn’t be all over each other during work hours. That wouldn’t be professional. It didn’t mean that they weren’t together, though.

“I’m good to go. Tonight is kind of a wash anyway.”

I could feel Claire’s gaze on me as we said our goodbyes and headed toward the entrance of the club. Even after leaving, though, I didn’t let go of Cameran’s hand. The warmth and pressure of her smaller fingers curled around mine was comforting, and she didn’t seem concerned about pulling away either. I tried not to read too much into that, given the circumstances of our run-in.

“So, I really am kind of hungry now,” Hailey said once we were outside. The night was warm and the air uncomfortably thick, though not as much as it was inside the building. I took a deep cleansing breath in, expelling the scent of sweat and alcohol from my nose. “Do you guys want to go grab some food with us?”

I cut my eyes to Hailey, widening them to get her attention. She glanced at me, but the only signal she gave me was a sharp grin. I didn't know what she was playing at, but I knew going against it now was probably not wise. We had barely been inside before I made us leave. It was probably best not to press my luck.

"Are you sure?" Cameran asked. She wasn't directing the question at Hailey, though; her eyes were on me. Now that we were outside and away from Claire, I was running into the same problem I always did when I was near Cameran. I didn't know what to say.

"Of course, she is," Hailey replied. She raised her eyebrows. "Aren't you, Jules?"

The sound of the nickname I hated had me gritting my teeth. She knew I disliked that name with a passion. Claire had never seemed to catch on even after I had mentioned it more than once.

"We don't have to."

Cameran's voice sounded so unsure then that I couldn't help myself from speaking. She had been thrust into this without being asked, and the least she deserved was for me to compensate her with food.

And a fucking apology.

My inner voice wasn't wrong. I squeezed her hand again and fixed a smile on my face. It felt brittle and not fully formed, but I kept it there as I looked down at Cameran.

"No, you should join us. Let me treat you both as an apology for roping you into all this."

"It really isn't any trou—"

"Sounds good to me," Sean cut in. I nodded at him in thanks. He was still smirking as if all of this was prime entertainment. Then again, if I were looking at this from the outside in, I might find it hilarious as well. Unfortunately for me, this was just another day in my real fucking messy life.

I sighed and forced my hand to relax. Feeling Cameran's slide away from mine was painful, and all the warmth leached away from me then. I shivered, despite the warm breeze, and, to keep from reaching out again, stuffed my hands in my back pockets.

"Anywhere in particular you guys want to go?"

My question seemed to get everyone in gear, and soon enough, our next location was decided. I didn't know how I was going to manage being

around Cameran for an entire night without word-vomiting all over her but based on the looks she gave me as she walked with Sean toward where they had parked, I was going to have to figure it out and fast.

I was still lost in thought when we reached Leon's car, and my hope that the silence would continue was dashed when Hailey promptly turned around from the front seat and leveled an unimpressed look at me.

"Stop being weird."

"Geez, tell me how you really feel," I griped as I stared out the window. I wasn't trying to be weird, but I was lost on how the fuck I was supposed to act now. I had kissed Cameran before I even learned her last name. How the hell could I come back from that?

Leon's laughter coaxed a small smile from me despite my mood. He reached back and patted my leg. "Give her a break, love. She's had an eventful night."

"Thank you." I pointed to him. "See, he gets it."

Hailey turned back around with a scoff but shot me a glance in the rearview mirror. "He is not the one who has had to listen to you bitch and moan about not being able to date the, and I fucking quote, cotton candy princess of your dreams, end quote." She slapped him on the leg, drawing another huff of laughter from him. "He doesn't get a say in this one."

"You're my best friend," I countered. "Why wouldn't I talk to you about the people I like?"

"Person. You never mentioned anyone else."

"I could have."

"You didn't."

I blew out a breath and crossed my arms. What could I say to that? It was true that it had been a while since I had found anyone else interesting enough to speak about them regularly, but I still didn't think I bitched about Cameran anymore than I might bitch about my job.

Hailey might have had a point about the moaning, though.

"I need new friends," I bit out.

"Good luck with that one," she replied with bared teeth. I wisely sat back and kept quiet for the rest of the drive.

When we pulled up to the restaurant, Sean and Cameran were walking up to the door, and I immediately zeroed in on her. It wasn't just her hair that caught my attention, though the light shining over her mahogany skin, making it seem to glow, would have won anyone's focus.

But it was something else, something less obvious from just a glance, that drew me to Cameran. Her presence was like everything I hoped to be.

She seemed friendly in a way I struggled with, and her personality—bubbly and effervescent—was like a beacon calling out to those of us who wanted to emulate that. Even in our short interactions, she seemed to be able to coax me out, like a turtle slowly seeing the world beyond its shell. She was warm and friendly, and I wanted to hover around and soak up her rays.

"Are you planning to get out anytime soon, or are you just going to sit in here and stare out the window?"

I scowled at Hailey before realizing that the car was parked, and Leon was already out and standing beside my door. My shoulders drooped as I realized I had no defense.

There is no way I'm going to get through this night without blowing it.

With a final goodbye to my pride, I opened my door and got out. Leon smiled and wrapped an arm around my shoulder.

"Don't look so down," he said, jostling me until I snorted and pushed him away. "You get to spend the night with your best friends and the lady of your dreams. Nothing better than that, right?"

"Only thing better would be her actually asking said lady out," Hailey threw out as she locked the door. She gave me a pointed look. "This is the perfect time, you know."

I groaned and looked skyward. "I can't do it now. Not after I practically jumped her just to get away from my ex. She probably thinks I go around kissing random women for shits and fucking giggles."

"I don't think she would have agreed to come out to eat with us if she thought that," Leon pointed out. The words sounded good, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to risk it. Even without the evening's antics, there was still the other reason I was hesitant to take a chance, and that one was far more daunting than anything else.

It was the reason my last relationship fell apart to begin with, as well as the reason that the last few dates I had gone on had never worked out.

It was the reason why tonight would be a dinner with new friends and nothing more.

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Chapter Five

Cameran

The world was gray. At least, that's how it seemed as I stared over the counter while Mrs. Pike counted out her change.

Normally I didn't mind the slowness of late afternoon. Compared to the mad dash that made up our mornings, the calm of the afternoon gave us time to do inventory and place orders for things we needed. It was also the time I usually took my break and reviewed paperwork. Sean had been right that we needed to hire another full-time employee, and I needed to get the posting up on our usual channels before the need made itself even clearer.

The sound of loose change hitting the counter jolted me out of my staring, and I blinked quickly, hoping no one caught me gazing off into space.

"I'm sorry, hon. These old hands aren't as quick as they used to be."

I forced a wide smile to my face and reached out to help. "That's okay, Mrs. Pike." I helped her gather and count out her change.

"Are you alright, honey?" she asked, catching me off guard. My smile fell momentarily before I caught myself and slipped it back into place.

"Oh, me? Of course." I could tell from her second glance that she didn't quite believe me. I shrugged my shoulders. "The rain is putting me in a less than sunny mood, I suppose."

She nodded and patted my hand. "It tends to do that." She reached back into her change purse and pulled out a wrinkled one-dollar bill. Before I could protest, she dropped it in the tip jar. "Rain always comes before the sun. My meemaw always used to tell me that. You just wait and see."

I ducked my head. “Yes, ma’am.”

With a final wink, she ambled down to the drink pick-up area. My heart felt a little lighter at her words. I was a little miffed at not being able to brush off my gloomy thoughts.

“You look like someone kicked your puppy.”

I rolled my eyes and turned to Sean. He leaned against the counter with his hip as he looked me up and down. Hiding my feelings from him never worked, and I had long since stopped trying. He and Rod were the only two people who could read me like a book, and while Rod might let me get away with staying in a less than stellar mood, Sean would not. It was heaven and hell being friends with someone more observant than me.

“I don’t have a puppy.”

“And you’re avoiding the subject.”

“I’m not avoiding anything,” I countered. “You haven’t even named a subject.”

“Two nights ago.”

My mouth shut with a click of my teeth, and I felt any sense of a good mood fade away. His brown eyes moved side-to-side as he watched me. I narrowed my eyes, staring back. As much as I hated being in a mood, I knew he disliked it even more when I wasn’t my normal self. He always said it was unnatural for me to be sad, a sentiment echoed by Rod whenever his input was asked for, which was a lot. I sighed when I realized that meant Sean had probably already called Rod and filled him in.

“Before you ask, yes, I called your brother, and yes, I told him you were sad. He says call him tonight. Otherwise, he is hopping on a plane and will be here by tomorrow morning.”

I frowned. “It really isn’t that serious.”

“Girl, you have been sighing every five minutes and looking like it’s the end of the world.” His eyes shifted to above my head. “Even your puff looks sad and deflated.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Harsh.”

He held out his arms. “Come here and tell Sean-Sean all about it.”

Despite my annoyance, I chuckled and walked over to him. “I haven’t called you that in years.”

“I know. I actually kind of miss it.”

He enveloped me in his arms, and I sighed as I wrapped my arms around his waist. The soft thump of his heart was a steady presence, and it

helped me center my thoughts. I let the rise and fall of his chest inform my own breathing, and I stood unmoving until mine matched. I hadn't realized how quickly I was breathing until I was coaxed into slowing down.

"Feel better?"

I nodded slowly and turned to bury my face in his chest. "Didn't realize it that time." My words were muffled in the fabric of his shirt, but I felt him nod as a hand rubbed my back.

"I figured you didn't. You were zoned out until Mrs. P dropped her money."

Forcing myself to take deep breaths helped calm my thoughts, and I slowly leaned away. "I hate when that happens." My arms felt heavy as I let them fall to my sides. Trembles shook me, and I wiggled my fingers until the pinpricks of pressure faded away.

"So do I," Sean agreed. He speared me with a look. "Do you need a day off? I can see if Kerri can pull a full eight hours on Wednesday."

I shook my head. "No, I'm fine."

"Okay, if you say so." He looked like he wanted to argue, but we were interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Well, isn't this a coincidence?"

I turned my head in surprise to see Claire standing at our counter. I hadn't paid too much attention to her Saturday night, but now I was seeing her in technicolor.

She was tall and leggy, the type of woman you assumed had modeled at some point in her life. Her blonde hair fell in loose waves over her shoulders in a way most women probably envied. She was as wholesome-looking as apple pie and had me remembering back to my private school days where girls like her were a dime a dozen. Her teeth were Arctic white, almost reflecting the lights in the café, and her smile was wide as her storm-gray eyes glanced back and forth between Sean and me.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Oh, no," I replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I was in the neighborhood showing some properties and needed a little pick-me-up, so I decided to swing by the first coffee shop I saw." She turned and looked around. "This place is just darling."

"Thank you." I stepped up to the counter. "What can I get you?"

"Oh, just a coffee. Two sugars and a splash of soy milk."

“I’ll get that started,” Sean said before turning away. I watched him for a moment before turning back to Claire. Small talk was normally easy for me, and I never had trouble thinking of things to say, even with new customers. Claire, though, was different. If I had never met her before, I wouldn’t have a problem. But knowing she was Julie’s ex changed things.

“So, you and Jules? How are things going?”

I blinked quickly, alarm bells ringing in my head. *Keep it vague. Don’t say too much, so she won’t know you’re lying.*

“Things are good.” Her smile didn’t change, and I knew she was waiting for more. “How are things with…um…”

“Kacey. Things are great,” she gushed. “We’ve been together one month now, and I think we’re getting really serious. She even talked about us moving in together, but I told her just because we’re two women doesn’t mean we can skip steps, you know?”

No. What steps? I nodded slowly, ignoring everything in me that was screaming in confusion. I didn’t know what steps she was talking about, and I didn’t know how to ask without revealing too much. Sean’s voice calling out Claire’s name saved me from making a bigger fool of myself, and I felt a moment of relief.

“Listen.” Claire leaned over the counter. “I won’t say anything about you and him, but you should probably decide if Jules is the one for you before you get too deep in it. You know?”

I frowned. “What?” Was she implying that Sean and I—

She straightened up before I could think of a response. “It was great to see you. I’ll have to stop in again and bring Kacey next time.”

“Wait. Wha—”

“I’ve got to run, girlie!” She walked over to the receiving counter and scooped up her drink with another gummy smile. She blew a kiss, heels clicking with each step. “Give Jules my love and let her know I’ll talk to her later.”

“Um,” I mumbled, watching as she walked out the door. “Okay.”

I wasn’t sure what had just happened, but I could tell it wasn’t something good.

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Chapter Six

Julie

"Whatever you're doing, drop it."

Papers fluttered to the floor as I jerked to attention. Hailey stood in my door, cell phone in hand, which wasn't altogether unusual. The scowl on her face as she peered down at me was one I was familiar with. It said she was pissed, and someone was damn well going to hear about it. Often, that someone was me, and it seemed now was going to be one of those times. I leaned over with a sigh. The way the papers had landed, I knew I was going to have to spend extra time arranging them back in order before I sent them along to the data team.

"What? Why?"

She looked up then, her eyes wide. "Because you may have a problem."

"The only problem I have right now is you barging in, making me drop my work."

I gathered the sheets with a grunt and tried to straighten them out. The numbers didn't make sense the order they were in, and I inwardly cursed having not numbered the document.

"Are you paying attention to me?" Hailey's voice went shrill, and I winced, hoping others in the hallway weren't listening in.

"Jesus, Hailey. What?"

She held the phone up, waving it in my direction, and I narrowed my eyes, trying to understand what I was looking at.

"What is it? Text messages?"

“Yes,” she replied, walking in and shutting my office door behind her. “Text messages from our new friend Sean letting me know that your favorite ex-girlfriend showed up today at their café.”

Shock, sharp and painful, shot through my system. Claire was at *Love & Lattes*? Why the hell would she have gone there?

“We need to go, now.”

“It’s only four.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she insisted. “Pack your shit. You started this mess, and you owe it to Cami to fix it.”

I sighed, knowing she was right.

Thoughts of Cameran had plagued me for the past two days as I ran back through all our interactions from Saturday night. We had talked during dinner, but it had been stilted as I tried to find a way to apologize for accosting her the first time we ran into one another outside of the café. Words were normally my forte, but explaining to my boss how we couldn’t push forward a deadline even if it did save the company thousands of dollars was a hell of a lot easier than trying to explain myself to Cameran.

My mind was still aggravatingly empty when Hailey and I walked through the doors of *Love & Lattes* twenty minutes later. The café was just as comforting as it was every time I stepped inside. The music was soft and upbeat, and the scents of roasting beans and baked bread immediately enveloped me in a cocoon of warmth and comfort. My stomach gurgled, and I blinked quickly when I remembered I hadn’t stopped to eat my lunch.

Hailey grabbed my arm and dragged me to the counter. I went with it, her grip not providing me any other option but to either follow or lose a limb. I saw Sean standing at the register, and he quirked an eyebrow up when he saw us. His lips tilted up in the same smirk from a few nights ago, and immediately, I felt judged. He and Hailey would no doubt become good friends. They both had a way of looking at you that let you know immediately you had been found lacking in some way.

Common sense, probably.

“That was fast.”

“No point in waiting,” Hailey replied. She glanced around. “Where’s Cami?”

I looked over at her. That was the second time she had called Cameran that. “Since when are you two close enough to text one another?”

“Really? That’s what you want to talk about?”

I shrugged out of her hold and crossed my arms. I knew I looked like a petulant child, but I hardly cared. If I thought I could get away with stamping my foot and demanding to go home, I probably would have. The sound of a door opening drew my attention, and my breath caught when I looked over to see Cameran coming from the back.

She looked as stunning as ever, with her hair encircling her face in a halo of lush-looking dark clouds. My arms fell away as she noticed us, and her eyes widened, making her look like a frightened doe. Time seemed to fall away as we locked gazes, and it was almost a shock to see her in the light of day without the shield of her glasses. Her eyes appeared bigger somehow, and the brown almost glowed with warmth, reminding me of the barley tea my mother would brew to warm us on cold winter days.

I held up a hand awkwardly when I realized too much time had gone by with neither of us having spoken.

“Hey, Cameran.”

She froze then. I don’t know how I could tell, but it was a level of stillness like just before a deer would dart away for safety. She blinked slowly as her gaze slid from me to Hailey. I felt almost bereft without those eyes on me, and it was a relief when they returned to me again.

“Hi.” She walked over, gaze still occasionally darting back and forth. “What’s going on?”

Hailey elbowed me, breaking the connection I had been bathing in, and I glared at her before stepping forward. “We heard my ex came in and just wanted to see if you are alright.”

Cameran nodded slowly. “Yeah, of course. She said she was in the neighborhood and just happened to stop by.”

More like she was scoping you out.

I didn’t believe for a second that Claire just happened to find Cameran’s coffee shop on accident. She rarely even came to this part of town and mostly stuck to North Atlanta and Buckhead. There had to be something more for her to have ventured this far into an area she had always found undesirable.

“I think I might have blown your cover, though,” Cameran continued, wrinkling her nose. It was a move I had seen her do multiple times before, and it never failed to make me melt with her cuteness. “She seemed to think Sean and I were flirting.”

Hailey snorted. “Did she now?”

“I’m sorry. I tried to—”

“You should date me,” I blurted out. Cameran’s mouth closed with an audible click, and I felt my cheeks slowly warm. *Oh, shit.* “Like, fake-date me.”

Cameran opened and closed her mouth twice before she managed to speak again. “You want me to fake-date you?”

I heard Hailey sigh beside me, but I knew this was a perfect plan. I could show Cameran that I was a perfect person to date and get Claire to back the fuck off. I needed to really sell it, though, so I knew I had to think fast.

“She and I had a shitty break-up, but maybe if I can show her that I am happily over her, she’ll get jealous and want me back.” *Not a chance, but at least it sounds good.* I had zero desire to be anywhere near Claire again, but this is what they did in those rom-coms and k-dramas my mom always watched.

Cameran frowned. “You want to get back with her? Doesn’t she have a girlfriend now?”

“She does, but if she’s actually coming around when she never did before, it has to be for a reason, right?” There was a reason, no doubt. It was because she hated being told no.

Cameran didn’t say anything. Her gaze was set on the counter between us, and I wondered if I had pushed it too far. Getting back with Claire was the farthest thing from my mind, and even if she did try to rekindle our relationship, I wasn’t interested. That ship had really and truly sailed.

The silence was stretching longer, and doubt slowly creeped in. “Shit, I didn’t even think to ask if you were even interested in women.”

Sean chuckled as Cameran’s head shot up. “This shit is too much for me.” He looked over at Hailey. “You want a cup of coffee or something?”

“That would be great.”

Cameran watched as they walked away, and I watched her. Her face was so expressive, and I knew I could look at it for hours and still not catalog all the nuances of her expressions.

“Cam?” The nickname felt good rolling off my tongue. I had never called her that in all our interactions, and by the look on her face, she must have noticed it as well, though she said nothing. With a jolt, I realized that outside of this past weekend, I had rarely called her by her name at all.

Damn. No wonder she barely talks around me.

"I'm sorry," I said, finally getting out the apology I should have given days ago. "I shouldn't have sprung all of this on you. You don't have to—"

"I'll do it."

My mouth hung open for a moment as I processed her words. "You will?"

"Yes. I'll fake-date you."

Ice poured over me then at remembering how I had phrased it. Fake dating. It wouldn't be real. Still, it was more than I had gotten before and definitely more than I deserved. I smiled wide, forcing myself to shake off the thoughts of wishing this were something more.

"Great. Thank you."

"You're welcome." She leaned her head down and looked up at me from beneath long thick lashes. Her cheeks looked almost rosy in the light, and I wanted to reach out to soak in that warmth. "So, how do we do this?"

How do we, indeed.

"Well, I should probably get your number first off." When she lifted her head, I quickly continued. "In case we need to coordinate. Relying on Hailey and Sean is probably not a good idea since they might be busy."

"Oh, that's true." She reached in her apron and took out her cell phone. I pulled mine out of my purse, and we took turns putting our numbers in. My mind buzzed with the knowledge that I finally had Cameran's number but not for the reason I wanted.

Silence fell over us again as we stood there. I didn't know what else to say, and Cameran seemed equally perplexed. This was not the way I wanted things to go.

"Um," I began, curling my hair behind my ear. "We should probably plan some dates at places I know Claire likes to go, so people see us together."

Cameran's eyes widened again. "That's probably a good idea because your ex is back again."

I jerked up straight in disbelief. Twice in one day? What game was Claire trying to play? Cameran looked at me, front teeth digging into her bottom lip. Before I could talk myself out of it, I leaned forward, reaching out to swipe my thumb across her lip. She let go, and I eyed the faint tooth marks imprinted in her skin. I thumbed the abused lip and looked up at her,

thinking forcefully calm thoughts. I wasn't a mind reader, but the steady gaze seemed to help, and after a moment, I leaned back, feigning nonchalance as I turned.

"Oh, hey, Claire. What are you doing here?"

The brief pause in her approach let me know my presence had caught her by surprise. Like always, it never lasted long. Soon enough, her expression faded back to the normal, slightly bored with life look she always had.

"Well, isn't this nice," she cooed, tone sickly sweet. From my peripheral, I could see Hailey watching with narrowed eyes. She would jump between us in a heartbeat, I knew, but I silently prayed she would leave it be so we didn't cause Cameran any more trouble than we already had. "I just wanted to stop in and get one final drink for the road. I didn't expect to see you here."

I leaned a hip on the counter and glanced at Cameran. "Why wouldn't I be here?" Claire's smile didn't change, but I knew she was probably cursing me in her mind.

"Oh, no reason."

I shifted down the counter to let her order and tried not to glare too hard at the side of her face. For her part, Cameran didn't seem to be affected. Then again, I didn't know her well enough to know what she would look like, even if she were. There was a lot I didn't know about Cameran, but I hoped to change that.

I was going to be the best fake girlfriend Cameran ever had.

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Chapter Seven

Cameran

"What are you doing?"

I ignored Sean's words as I packed away the pitchers and wiped down the counter. Hailey and Julie had left not long after Claire, and the memory of Julie's warm brown eyes lingering on me as they walked out the door was a memory I knew I would ponder over for the next few days. His gaze was heavy, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up with the weight of it. Explaining myself to him was going to take skill, considering I didn't even know what I was doing.

When Julie had proposed pretending we were in a relationship, at first, I thought it must have been a figment of my overactive imagination. It wouldn't be the first time I had fantasized about how one of our interactions would go, and I'm sure it wouldn't be the last time either. When there was a rare lull in customers and not much to do beyond listening for the ticks and tocks of the clock on the wall, I would let my mind wander, and more often as of late, my thoughts had wandered to Julie.

Movies and books were all the inspiration I had to draw from, given my abysmal lack of experience, and it was those interactions that I used to create scenarios. Now that we were here, I was finding myself struggling. How was I supposed to act? What would be too much?

"You do realize this isn't how you're supposed to go about finding a girlfriend?"

"I know what I'm doing."

Lies.

"Now, sis. You might be okay lying to yourself, but don't lie to me."

I paused and considered his words. He was right. I was never able to hide things from him, to begin with, so why do it now? Especially when I was going to need his help with figuring out how to make this ruse work. Decision made, I turned to Sean and smiled. He must have sensed something was up because he put a hand up.

"Before you ask, no."

I walked over to him before he could move away and grabbed his hands. "Please. You have to help me."

"I don't *have* to do anything."

"Don't you want me to have a girlfriend? You were the one who told me to put myself out there and take a chance."

"I meant a real chance," he replied, trying to pull his hands away. I knew it was half-hearted at best. If Sean had wanted to pull away, he could have done so easily. "This is not in the slightest what I meant, and you know it."

"I know, but…" I trailed off as I tried to explain just how much I needed this and needed him to do it. "I don't know the first thing about how to be in a relationship or how to turn this thing into something real."

He looked at me with narrowed eyes. "What are you talking about? Explain to me your thought process here because all I see is foolishness."

"I'm going to try to convince Julie that she should date me…for real."

He raised an eyebrow, frown turning softer. "And how are you planning on doing that?"

I shrugged. "That part is what I need your help on."

Sean gazed at me for a few moments longer before his frown morphed into a smirk. "Well, perhaps I can help then after all." He narrowed his eyes again. "But let it be known, I still think this is a foolish ass plan."

I giggled. He could think it was ridiculous all he wanted to as long as he decided to help me in the end.

~*~*~

Walking up to the building, I could almost swear my heart was trying to pump its way from my chest, and I flapped my arms slightly to fan away the damp buildup under them. Sean had gotten Hailey and Julie's building number the night before when I mentioned figuring out ways to sweep Julie off her feet.

“Take her food and make sure to bring extra for the office. That shit always works.”

The suggestion itself hadn’t been a bad one. It wouldn’t be the first time I had delivered something from our café, but it was the first time I was delivering something out of my own desire and not for an order. I could say that I was nervous, but that would be a gross understatement of how I truly felt. Getting to the building was easy enough. I hadn’t realized that Julie worked so close, and not even ten minutes after I left, I was already walking through the high-rise’s doors.

The elevator ride up to the ninth floor was a test in patience, and when I stepped in front of the sign for her company, I was shocked I didn’t turn tail and run. With a deep breath in, I pushed the heavy doors open, taking care not to crush the box of pastries against me and thereby ruin the surprise. The minimalist décor was so unlike my café, and I glanced down at my clothes, wondering if maybe I should have changed.

I had taken off my apron before I left, but the pink and white polka dot blouse paired with my tan jumper might still have been too bold of a choice. I glanced up at the receptionist, and my heart plummeted when I saw she was wearing a simple white blouse that was probably paired with something business-casual like black dress pants. I was about to turn around and count this as a wash for a first attempt until I heard my name being called.

“Cameran?”

I pasted a smile on my face and turned just in time to be pulled into a hug. Hailey leaned back, her lips pulled into a wide grin. When she looked down, her eyebrows raised. “Oh my gosh. Did you bring goodies for your girl?”

My cheeks filled with heat at the sound of it, and I nodded meekly. “Yeah. I thought it would be nice to bring something for Julie if that’s okay?”

She wrapped an arm around my shoulder and waved off the receptionist. “As long as you have something in there for me, then that’s all good.”

“Oh, of course.”

“You are perfect. Here, let me take you to Julie’s office.”

We walked together, her arm never pulling away, and she waved down whoever walked by to introduce me. I bit my lip when we moved into

a clear hallway.

“I didn’t even think to ask if Julie was out here,” I said, voice pitched low. I didn’t want anyone to overhear. “Maybe I should have just called her down to get them?”

Hailey shook her head. “Oh, no worries about that. Everyone here knows Julie dates women. She’s been out since she started working here.”

That took one worry off my plate, and my footsteps felt lighter as we continued down the hallway. Hailey stopped at a door and knocked before going in. Julie was behind a desk, her dark head bent over, as she stared at some papers in front of her.

“No, I don’t have those reports ready for you yet, Bradley. Stop asking me about them.”

“I’ll let him know.”

Julie’s head lifted up, and I snorted softly when I saw she had a pen cap in her mouth. Her gaze landed on us, and she hastily spit it out before standing.

“Cameran. What are you doing here?”

I shrugged and held up the box in my hands. “Things were slow at the café, so I thought I would bring you over a little pick-me-up.”

“Isn’t that nice?” Hailey cooed. “I wish I had a girlfriend who brought me delicious things without me having to ask.”

Julie rolled her eyes as she walked over to us. “You have a boyfriend who does practically whatever you want, so I’m sure you’re fine.”

I tried not to shift as I watched her come closer. Julie’s long legs were hard to miss wrapped in the soft-looking fabric of her pants. They came up to her mid-waist, displaying hips I would have loved to grip. Her blouse was dark blue and looked heavenly against her tawny skin. Every part of her screamed business, but for some reason, to me, it translated to pleasure.

I swallowed hard and tried to focus back on what I came for. “I wasn’t sure what you might want, so I brought a little of everything.”

Julie’s smile was wide, and my breath hitched when she reached out. Our hands brushed as she took the box and peered inside.

“Oh, fuck yes. These are all the best things.” When she looked back up at me, I could have happily burst into flames right then. “Do I have to share, or can I hide out in my office and stuff my face?”

“Up to you.”

“Don’t forget at least one of those is mine,” Hailey cut in. She walked over to Julie and peered into the box before letting out a quiet whistle. “Man. I definitely need a girlfriend.”

I ducked my head and smiled, warmth filling me, in knowing that I did good. *First step in the plan is a success.*

“I should probably get going now and let you get back to work. I could only step away for a bit, but the lunch crowd will start coming in soon, and I don’t want to leave Sean there to man it by himself.”

“Oh, you have to go already?” I wasn’t entirely sure, but Julie almost seemed disappointed. The possibility that she wanted me to stick around longer brought a smile to my face and a warmth to my chest. “Well, let me walk you out at least.”

I nodded, pleased that Julie had offered. I waited while she and Hailey bickered. The two of them were amusing to watch, and I averted my eyes when Hailey managed to sneak away with a croissant clutched in her grip. Julie shook her head and gestured for me to follow her.

Walking back through the office with Julie this time was better than when I had come in. Hailey was great, and I could see myself really enjoying her company, but it was nothing compared to having Julie slide her hand in mine, not caring who in the office might have seen. Any thoughts of her being concerned with people seeing us and knowing we were together flew from my mind.

“It must be nice to not have to worry about having to hide things at work,” I said, making conversation.

“Definitely. Plus, some of the people here know Claire, so if they know you came by, it’s sure to get back to her.”

Cold water doused my cheer at her words. In the course of a few minutes, I had forgotten that this wasn’t real. This was all for show to prove that Julie had moved on. I had somehow forgotten that, and being reminded so abruptly sapped the joy I had felt.

“Right. Glad I could help.” I tried to keep my voice jolly, and thankfully either Julie couldn’t tell, or she was nice enough to ignore my tone. When we got back to the front lobby, I reluctantly slid my hand away.

“Well, I should get going. I can go on my own from here.”

Julie looked down for a moment. “Right. Well, hey, thank you for stopping by. Feel free to come by whenever, with or without goodies. I

wouldn’t want Hailey to get spoiled.”

I nodded. Before I could turn away, she reached out and caught my hand again. “Wait.” She paused and looked away before fixing her gaze back on me. “Can I kiss you? It’s how I…it’s okay if not.”

My pulse jumped, and as much as I told myself this was fake, I couldn’t help but want to lean in and have the sensation of her lips on mine again. I didn’t trust my voice, so I nodded and closed my eyes.

The brush of air across my cheeks had me tensing up before I felt soft lips meet my own. The feeling was indescribable. Nerves I didn’t know existed woke up and took notice, and it felt like every slide of Julie’s lips against mine set them all ablaze. I didn’t think twice before taking her face in my hands and pressing my lips more fully against hers. In the back of my mind, I remembered that we were at her office, so with a soft groan of regret, I pulled away before I got too swept up.

Julie opened her eyes, gaze intently staring somewhere below my eyes. She had spots of rose on her cheeks, and I internally let out a triumphant cackle at having been the one to put them there. I brushed a thumb over those high spots of color before moving away.

“Have a great day at work,” I said softly. My voice was pitched low and rougher than I had ever heard it. The sound seemed to shake her out of it, and her eyes opened fully.

Her lips quirked up in a smile before she nodded. “You too. Be careful getting back.”

I smiled, pleased at how things had gone. I didn’t wait for her to turn away before making my way to the door with an extra swing in my step, hips swaying for her eyes alone. I wasn’t sure if she was watching as I walked away, but I figured it couldn’t hurt.

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Chapter Eight

Julie

How I was supposed to get anything done with the memory of Cameran's hips, swaying to a beat only she could hear, lingering in my mind was anyone's guess. She probably didn't mean to draw attention to the way they danced as she walked away, but my gaze couldn't help but be drawn down as she turned and left the building. The jumper she had worn wasn't tight-fitting, but it still accentuated the lines of her curves, the likes of which I had always noticed with envy and want. It had taken everything in me not to follow her down the street like a puppy trailing after its handler, but with the memory of pastries upstairs, I hurried back to the office, intent on sinking my teeth into several of them before the day was through.

I was unprepared to see Hailey standing in my office enjoying the baked goods that I had wanted to hoard to myself, but I knew I shouldn't have been surprised. The pastries alone would have drawn her in, but the knowledge that it was Cameran who had brought them was what she was really sticking around for. Her knowing gaze said as much as I closed the door behind me.

"Go on, spit it out."

She arched a brow and looked at me as she swallowed the bit of pastry in her mouth. "Spit what out?"

I didn't buy her innocent act for one bit. Nothing about her had been innocent for a long time, and after only a moment of me staring, she rolled her eyes, lips curling into a smirk.

"Fine. You're no fun."

“I got you pastries.”

She ignored that and lifted her hand to take another bite. “So, it was awfully sweet of Cami to come all the way over here and bring you pastries.”

“It wasn’t that far,” I muttered as I peered into the box. “But it was really nice of her.” Victim chosen, I lifted a fruit tart from the box, intent on savoring it. Hailey had other plans, of course, not letting up on her questions.

“I don’t think Claire ever brought you anything at the office.”

The bite of heaven on my tongue was slightly soured by the sound of that name, and I scowled at Hailey around my bite. Did she really have to bring up Claire now? The day was going so well.

“So?”

“So, I just think what Cami did is really nice. That’s all,” she replied. She licked her fingers before leaning back over the box. Before she could grab for anything else, I blocked her and shooed her away.

“No. You had who knows how many before I got back up here. Go find your own girlfriend to bring you pastries.”

She sighed loudly, sounding very put out, but I was determined to gorge myself until the only things left were crumbs and memories.

“Fake girlfriend.”

I paused in my bite as those two words pierced the air. It was the truth. This was just a ruse. This wasn’t real, and the reminder of that one detail was enough to dampen my spirits. It didn’t stop the last bite of my tart from being just as delicious, but it did sober me slightly as I thought about how this would have to end sometime.

And then what?

Hailey must have noticed my change in mood because she didn’t fight to regain control of the box. “I’m going to try to finish up some work,” she said, eyeing me in a way I didn’t appreciate. I knew she wanted to say more, but I wasn’t sure if the more she wanted to say was going to kill my mood for the rest of the day or provide me with a small bit of hope. It was always a mixed bag coming from her.

“Maybe you should think on the fact that your fake girlfriend did in one day what your real ex-girlfriend never did in the three years you were together.”

I chewed slowly as I thought about Hailey's parting shot. She didn't glance back as she left my office and shut the door behind her. She didn't need to, though. Her final words had already done exactly what she wanted them to, and they stayed on my mind until I found myself back home, contemplating the relationship I was intent on forgetting.

My phone buzzed, and I shook away my thoughts. When I saw it was a text from Cameran, I swallowed hard before opening the message.

'I hope the pastries were okay?'

Shit. I had forgotten to text her back and thank her again. I groaned when I realized I was being a shit girlfriend in this whole fake scenario. Not pausing to stress about what to say, I immediately texted back.

'They were amazing! Thank you.'

I took a moment as I tried to think of how to keep this exchange going. I wasn't going to be able to show Cameran I was a good catch if all she did was give and all I did was take. I had to reciprocate somehow.

'How can I repay you?'

I shook my head and deleted my words. I didn't want to make this sound transactional or like a fucking business deal. Surely, I wasn't that rusty when it came to trying to date someone.

'I brought the box home for dessert, but I haven't had dinner yet. Let me take you out as a thank you?'

That sounded much better. *Maybe I do have some game left.* I snorted at thinking I was in control of the situation. Flying by the seat of my pants was apparently my new strategy for this, and anyone with eyes could probably see it. The ping of my phone made my pulse jump, and I peered down at my phone, gearing up for rejection.

'That sounds great. I'm free tonight if you are?'

I stared at the message, sure my eyes were deceiving me, but there it was. Cameran had agreed to a date with me.

"No, not a date," I corrected myself. "Just dinner."

The distinction did nothing to pause my eager response back with a place and a time to meet. Once I did that, I dropped the phone on the couch beside me and stared out at the room. None of the brief encounters I'd had since my split with Claire had been anything other than nights of sex to relieve stress and pent-up need. As much as I was telling myself this was just a dinner between two potential friends, I couldn't squash the hope in me.

Friends don’t kiss each other like that.

It was true. I had never kissed any of my friends like I kissed Cameran, and I certainly didn’t stare at them the way I sometimes found myself staring at her. I had to get this right.

~*~*~

The air was sticky and warm as I walked up to the restaurant, and I regretted wearing a blouse with long sleeves. Even with it being sheer enough to allow air to flow through and keeping a few top buttons open, I could still feel my skin dampen, and I hoped the restaurant inside would be as cool as it normally was.

I opened the door, letting out a sigh of relief when chilled air rushed out to meet me, and I followed the hostess as she led me to the table I had reserved. It was a small table for two in the corner of the dining area, and it gave me a pretty good view of the door. I checked my watch, noting that I was early by a few minutes, and took that time to gaze down at the wine menu.

Claire had always been the one to take charge, often ordering wines I had never heard of. It was strange to now be the one driving things but also freeing. I liked the control back in my hands, but I would happily wait until Cameran arrived before ordering anything. I wasn’t waiting long before a familiar head of thick hair walked through the door. I slowly stood, mouth dry as the same hostess brought Cameran to the table. I had seen Cameran out at the bar, but now, in the sensual candlelit room, she looked even more like she had stepped out of one of my fantasies.

Her hair was loose, falling in thick dark spirals over her bare shoulders. Her glasses were gone, giving me unrestricted access to those dark pools of soul, and her skin looked flawless and touchable. Her lips were stained red, and I almost stumbled toward her with the need to feel them under mine again. Never had attraction been so instant before. Every time I saw her, there was something else that drew me in.

Before I could stop myself, I reached out a hand. For one terrifying moment, Cameran looked at it, and I worried she would let me hang there in my awkwardness. When she reached out, fingers meeting mine, I let out the breath I was holding and guided her hand up to brush a kiss across it. I

couldn’t tell if the light blush on her cheeks was from her or artificial, but I let the sight of it boost my confidence as I guided her to her chair. I nodded at the hostess in thanks before taking my seat across the table.

“Wow. I don’t think I’ve been here before.”

Her voice was soft, matching the feeling of the restaurant, and I leaned forward, enjoying our little bubble.

“It can be a little pretentious, but the food is delicious, and it’s quiet enough that we can actually have a conversation.”

Cameran looked up at me, candlelight reflected in her eyes, as if the flame was coming from inside of her. It was mesmerizing. Her smile was soft and sweet, and I found myself smiling along with her. The waitress took our order, both of us agreeing on a bottle of wine to share and an appetizer to split.

“So, do you come here often?” I chuckled when Cameran put her hand over her face before I could respond. “Oh my god, that is the worst pick-up line ever.”

“Were you trying to pick me up?”

She dropped her hand to the table. “No. I mean,” she glanced at me. “I already have you here, so…”

“Touché,” I agreed.

The conversation flowed through our appetizer and into our meal. I twirled linguine onto my spoon as I chuckled at Cameran’s description of one of her least favorite customers.

“So, I tell her, the only teas we have available are the ones on the board, but she insisted we had some secret ones in the back that we weren’t giving her.”

“Wow. Did you have some different ones back there?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Cameran admitted, not sounding the least bit repentant. “But after the grief she gave me, I just refused to give her any.”

My laugh had me squeezing back tears, and I shook my head when I saw how pleased Cameran was. I couldn’t help but think I probably would have done the same thing with a rudely demanding customer like that.

“I don’t how you handle people like that, but I salute you.”

She shrugged, drawing my eyes back to the dip of her collarbone. Her skin almost shone with inner warmth and light even in the muted light of the room. Impulsively, I lifted my fork and held it out to her.

“You should try this. It’s amazing.”

She looked at me before looking down at the fork, and I wondered if I was crossing a line. For a split second, her expression changed, but before I could pull my arm away and apologize, Cameran leaned forward, cupping her hand around mine, keeping it in place. I was frozen, unable to do anything but watch as her lips parted, and she took the forkful into her mouth. My own lips parted as she pulled back, eyes fluttering slightly.

Time stood still as I watched her chew, and I didn't even think to pull my hand away. Her eyes opened slowly and pinned me in their gaze. Dark red lips quirked up, and I licked my own when her throat bobbed as she swallowed. This wasn't the bubbly barista. This Cameran was a siren, and she had me locked in her thrall.

"It's delicious."

Her voice was pitched low, and I nodded, not knowing how else to respond. I gladly fed her more until my plate was empty, and my mind was full of memories of her devouring each bite. When the spell was broken by my name being called, I almost bared my teeth in anger at having my attention pulled away.

"Julie?"

I turned, narrowing my eyes as I caught sight of two of Claire's close friends. They almost seemed dull in comparison to the vibrant woman seated across from me. I sighed internally as I nodded a greeting. Gazes flitted back and forth between me and Cameran, and I drooped when she pulled her hand away, freeing mine.

"Hey, Hannah. Jaime." I glanced behind them, hoping Claire wasn't about to walk through the door as well. "Good to see you."

It wasn't.

I would have been just fine never talking to the pair of them again. Out of all of Claire's clique, the two of them were the ones who talked the most shit, and I knew without a doubt that Claire would know I was here with Cameran by the time the two of them sat down.

"You too," Hannah replied. She and Jaime shared a glance before gesturing at Cameran. "Who's your friend?"

I narrowed my eyes at how she said that but turned and gave Cameran what I hoped was a reassuring smile. "This is my girlfriend, Cameran. Cameran, this is Hannah and Jaime. They're friends of Claire."

"Oh, we're your friends too," Hannah gushed. Jaime didn't say anything, and I respected her for it. She was never a fan of me, to begin

with, and I wasn't fond of her either. "We should all get together sometime like before. Just because you and Claire broke up doesn't mean we can't stay friends."

"Sure," I said simply. She was full of shit, but I didn't want to ruin the night by saying how I truly felt. "Well, have a great dinner."

Jaime's expression remained unchanged, but Hannah's smile slipped slightly before she caught it. She waved as they moved away, and I didn't bother watching to see where they were seated.

"They seem…nice," Cameran said carefully.

I snorted. "They are to your face. Behind your back is another story."

Her expression spoke of understanding exactly what I meant. I didn't want to rehash the history of those two, so I dropped my fork and lifted my glass.

"To real friends, old and hopefully new."

She gazed at me for a moment before her lips quirked up in a familiar smile. She lifted her own glass and clinked with mine. It wasn't friendship I wanted to toast to, but for now, I knew it would have to do.

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Chapter Nine

Cameran

"So, a little birdie told me he saw you and Miss Thing last night looking real cozy."

I rolled my eyes as I pressed the keypad for the espresso. When the machine gurgled, I turned to look at Sean. He was leaning on the counter with a shit-eating grin on his face. I didn't know why he was acting like I was embarrassed to be found out. Dinner last night with Julie was amazing, and I didn't care who knew.

"Your little birdies have big mouths then."

"Oh, I can guarantee that," he agreed. "Well, out with it, then. How was the date?"

My lips twitched as I tried to rein in my smile. It was inevitable, though. Just the thought of last night had my stomach doing flips and my blood rushing through my veins. Dinner had been amazing, even with the interruption from two unwanted guests. I wasn't sure whether it truly was a coincidence that friends of Claire happened to see us or if that was planned. I knew Julie wanted to prove that she was over Claire, which was why we were even doing this fake dating thing, but I hoped that if she needed to plan for us to be seen together, she would let me know ahead of time—if only so I didn't embarrass the both of us by saying the wrong things.

"Why are you frowning?" Sean asked, drawing my attention. The smirk was nowhere to be seen now, and he was looking at me with a measured gaze. "Was it not good? Did Julie say something to upset you?"

I shook my head. "No, nothing like that." I bit my lips, not knowing exactly how to voice my concerns. Thankfully, the espresso machine stopped then, and I had an excuse to take my time. I poured the espresso

into the cup as I contemplated how to voice the thoughts rolling around in my mind. Drink delivered, I turned back to him.

"It's just, two of Julie's ex-girlfriend's friends came by our table."

His eyebrows rose. "Oh shit, really? Did they say anything?"

"No. Just standard introductions, really, but I don't know if Julie invited me to dinner knowing they would be by or if Claire sent them." Sean's lips turned down, and I could tell he was thinking over what I said. "Or it could all just be a coincidence."

"Sure," he agreed. "Have you talked to Julie about it?"

"No. I don't want her to think I can't handle this arrangement."

"Well, still, you should ask her about it. If she wants to stage places for you guys to run into Claire's friends, she needs to let you know ahead of time. It's not fair to spring that on you with no notice."

He was right, and I knew it, but figuring out how to bring it up was going to be a tough one. "You're right," I finally conceded. "I know you are. I'm just not sure how to start that conversation."

"Well, you'd better think of it fast because the ex-girlfriend just walked through our door…again."

I whirled my head around, and sure enough, Claire walked in, her heels clicking on the wooden floor. I pasted a smile on my face and headed to the register.

"Hey there. What can I get started for you?"

"Well, hey there to you too!" She was smiling wide, but something about it seemed artificial. I didn't think she was happy to see me at all, but two could play at that game. I kept my smile on my face like I would for any other customer.

"Let me get a small soy latte. Iced."

I nodded and grabbed a cup, marking it down and setting it on the bar. Sean picked it up and flashed me a brief smile before moving to start the drink. Claire handed me her card, and I quickly rang her up before handing it back.

"So, listen. I heard you and Jules were at Le Bilboquet last night."

"Oh?" I kept my voice light as if I had no problem with her question. Her smile didn't change, but I saw something shift behind her eyes. It was that shift—that momentary view of the woman behind the mask—that had me changing my approach.

“We decided to have a nice night out. Work can be so stressful sometimes,” I said, wrinkling my nose. I didn’t go through twelve years of private school without coming out knowing how to play the game. People like Claire thrived off targets not fighting back.

I was no punk. If she wanted to play, I was going to play to win.

“Julie has been so great with my long hours here, so I wanted to treat her for an evening. You know how it is.” I smiled wide, baring my teeth. She took a small step back at that, and inner me cheered.

That’s right. Fall back, bitch.

“Here’s your latte,” Sean said, breaking the stalemate of silence. He glanced at me briefly, lips tipping up in a half-smile before he moved on. I took it as encouragement. He was always after me to be less nice, and I thought he would probably approve of me letting a little of my inner bitch shine through.

Hell, he would probably do or say worse if he were in my position.

Claire took her drink, still eyeing me as if she didn’t know what to say. I knew that respite wouldn’t last long, and I was proven right when she flipped her hair and opened her mouth.

“Well, I’m glad you took her to her favorite restaurant.” She shook her cup and took a sip. “I remember how much she enjoyed it the first time I took her there. So many good memories.”

That detail made me pause. I had wondered if Julie chose that place because she knew she might run into Claire, and now, the question returned with a vengeance. I ignored it for now and kept my expression neutral. If Claire sensed any insecurity, I knew she would gleefully push on it.

“Mm,” I hummed noncommittedly. The bell at the front door rang, and I was thankful for the reprieve of other customers until I saw Julie walk in. Her gaze landed on me almost immediately, and I nearly forgot Claire was there. Sadly, people didn’t just disappear into thin air by thought alone.

Or drop dead.

“Oh, Julie. Good to see you again.”

Julie didn’t seem surprised to see Claire, and I glanced at Sean in confusion. His pointed look had me wondering if he and Hailey had something to do with her abrupt appearance. Regardless, I knew I needed to take an active role in this. I marched around the counter, giving up all pretenses of being cool and calm. Claire arched a well-manicured brow at me as I passed her, but Julie stood still, watching me intently.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I stepped up to Julie and cupped my hands around her cheeks, bringing her lips down to meet mine. The pleasure was instant, and I felt her sigh against me as if in relief. Hands lightly gripped my hips as we stood there. I took a chance then and parted my lips slightly until I could snake my tongue out to brush against her bottom lip. It was a gamble, but when Julie's lips parted in return, and I felt an answering nudge, my mind filled with static. It was the sound of coughing that had me finally pulling back.

Julie's eyes opened slowly, liquid pools of espresso locking onto me after a few moments, and I reveled in the points of rouge on her cheeks. I had done that. I had brought out the heat in her, and I felt a shiver of pleasure skirt down my spine before I remembered the reason for all of this was still standing at my counter. Julie must have had the same realization because her gaze shifted to behind me. She took a step to the side but left an arm around my waist.

"What are you doing here, Claire?"

Claire looked like she had swallowed something sour with her lips pursed out and her narrowed eyes. I let a little of my smugness show, quirking my mouth to the side. I didn't understand where this petty side was coming from, but I could tell by Sean's gleeful expression that he was living for it.

"I was trying to invite you two for a little girls' night out at Lipstick Lounge. I know the ladies have missed you, and it would be good to get the old group together again."

"I don't know if that—"

"Sure," I cut in, stopping Julie from answering. She looked down at me, and I tried to give her a reassuring expression. We needed to really sell this fake dating thing, and what better way to do it than with an audience?

"Are you sure, baby?"

The pet name had me fighting back pleased shivers, and I had to swallow hard before I could answer.

"Yes. Might be fun to get out and do something different."

Claire jumped in before Julie could get out another word. "Great. I'll let the girls know and go ahead and reserve us a table for Saturday night. Dress to impress like always." She eyed me up and down. "I'm sure Julie could help you pick out something more fitting. She did learn from the best."

Julie’s grip tightened on my waist, and I tried not to let Claire’s words affect me. She wiggled her fingers before walking past us and leaving the café. Julie and I watched her go before turning to look at each other.

“Are you sure about this?” she asked, sounding worried. “We don’t have to. Most of those friends are Claire’s and not mine.”

I appreciated her giving me an out, but it was done now. Plus, this gave me another chance to play the girlfriend and really get the experience.

“I’m sure. We should go to keep up appearances and really show her you are happily moved on.”

Plus, I didn’t know how long Julie would want to keep this arrangement going. I needed to get as much out of it as I could so I could convince her to take a real shot with me.

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Chapter Ten

Julie

I was nervous. Cameran had said she wanted to do this, but a part of me still worried that this whole experience would be too much for her to want to continue this fake relationship. Claire's friends could be judgmental assholes on the best of days, never mind when they had been wound up by Claire's mouth. Being around them had never been an enjoyable experience, but I always dealt with it because I had no choice. Now, I wasn't sure I wanted to be anywhere near them.

Nah. I know I don't.

I sighed. Tonight was going to be a test of my already severely lacking patience, and I wasn't looking forward to it. Being around Cameran, yes. Being around Claire, fuck no.

My cell phone rang as I was putting the final touches on my outfit. I had gone with my normal tight black leather pants and flowy blouse and paired them with a couple of gold chains I knew looked good against my skin. It wasn't exactly Claire's idea of dress to impress. She had always preferred me play up a more feminine style with skirts and tight-fitting dresses, but that wasn't me. I hated dresses with a passion and had donated most of the clothes I had accumulated while she and I were together as soon as we split.

I saw it was Cameran calling and smiled when I connected the call. "Hey. I'm about to head your way."

"Oh, could you actually get me from Sean's place? He was having a bit of a moment, so I came over here to get ready."

"Sure. Text me his address, and I'll head straight over."

“Great. See you soon,” she enthused before the call cut off. I chuckled at her energy and was glad that at least one of us seemed excited about tonight. I grabbed my watch and slid it on before gathering my keys and wallet and heading out the door.

The night was warm, and the air almost seemed electrified with anticipation. Anxiety thrummed through me as I made my way through the streets, with only the navigation providing the occasional break in the silence. When I pulled up to the gated complex the tinny voice in the GPS took me to, I put in the code Cameran had provided and was quickly buzzed in. The townhomes I drove by were impressive, and for the first time, I wondered how profitable the coffee shop was to afford such a large home so close to downtown.

I pulled into the driveway, not hesitating to get out of the car. As I walked up the stairs to the front door, it opened, letting light from inside spill out. Sean stood in the doorway, looking the same as always. He smiled as I called out a greeting. He lifted a hand in response before my eyes were drawn to the figure behind him. I stumbled on the final step when I saw her.

Cameran’s petite frame was wrapped in shimmery gold that clung to every dip and curve. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun with several ringlets left out to frame her heart-shaped face, and her natural beauty was enhanced with just the right blend of makeup to make her features sing. I was struck speechless. My mouth hung open as she walked over to me, and when she got close enough, I was enveloped in a soft scent that made me think of silk sheets and heated touches on bare skin.

“Wow,” I breathed out, not knowing how else to convey how awestruck I was in her presence. She ducked her head, smile wide with clear pleasure.

“Really?” she asked, voice trembling slightly. “It’s not too much?”

“Girl, you look amazing,” Sean said, guiding her out the door. He looked at me with knowing eyes, and right then, I could tell my feelings were plain to see. I wasn’t faking this. Cameran was beautiful no matter what she wore, but tonight, she was truly in a league of her own.

I offered my arm, trying to tone down my reaction to a level that wouldn’t be considered too much for someone in our situation. When her hand curled around my forearm, the heat in that touch nearly sent me to my knees. I swallowed hard and leaned down until I was fully enveloped in her scent.

“He’s right. You look absolutely gorgeous.”

I wasn’t sure if I were hallucinating the slight darkening hue on her cheeks, but I hoped she was affected just as much as I was. Her smile seemed pleased, and it took everything in me to not cover her rose-red lips with my own.

“Be safe, kiddos,” Sean called out as we descended the stairs. “Take care of my girl.”

“Absolutely,” I called back as I guided her to the passenger side of my car. I opened the door for her, almost unable to let go of her hand once she was settled in her seat. I gave Sean a final wave as I hurried to my side and got in.

The car was filling with the intoxicating perfume that emanated from Cameran, and I knew I would be scenting her for days after. *Imagine if this fragrance was in your bed.* The thought had me shifting in my seat as I pulled back out of the driveway and guided us back out of the subdivision. We were silent as we sped down the road, but I could feel Cameran’s gaze on the side of my face like the heaviest caress. I glanced over at her.

“Are you sure you—”

“You look hot.”

Her sentence was abrupt, and it startled me into pressing hard on the accelerator for a moment before I eased my foot up. I looked over at her, my lips turned up in amusement. She had a hand over her face as she shook her head.

“That is not what I meant to say.”

I chuckled. “So, you don’t think I look hot?”

She dropped her hand and looked at me with narrowed eyes. I kept the smile on my face and turned most of my attention back to the road.

“Of course, I do. I just didn’t mean to say it like that.”

“How did you mean to say it, then?”

I saw her purse her lips and couldn’t help but laugh. Usually, it was me with my foot in my mouth, so I was enjoying this turn of events. Plus, a flustered Cameran was endearingly cute.

“You’re just fishing for compliments now.”

“Maybe,” I said with a shrug. “I like when you say them, though.” She hummed in response, but her lips remained turned up in a small smile.

The drive into downtown was easy, even with the traffic. It was Atlanta. It didn’t matter what time you drove in; there would always be

traffic somewhere. I pulled up to the valet parking, happy to fork over the cash for someone else to park my car instead of me.

With Cameran on my arm again, I felt like the luckiest woman in the city as we walked into the club. Claire always liked the Lipstick Lounge because it was the most upscale lesbian bar in the city. The drinks and music were good, but she usually reserved a booth away from all the action and never really mingled with the rest of the patrons. Getting her to go dance used to be like pulling teeth, and I was glad to not have to deal with it now. I liked this place, but I hadn't been back since our split.

"I've never been here before."

I glanced down at Cameran as we made our way to the back, where I knew Claire would be. "No? Where do you normally like to go?"

Cameran shrugged. "Nowhere, I guess. I'm not really into bars or clubs unless Sean convinces me to go with him. The café takes up a lot of my time."

"I can understand that."

When we got to the reserved section, Claire was already there with her friends, including Hannah and Jaime. Claire stood up and waved us in past the roped entrance. Cameran and I took a seat on the outside, and I noted that the glances from everyone else ranged from mere curiosity to clear dislike. I once again regretted not pushing back harder on not joining them and vowed to spend more time actually enjoying the rest of the club instead of staying isolated up here in VIP.

"Glad you two could join us," Claire gushed. The tone of her voice suggested anything but, but I smiled through it, intent on ignoring her baiting words. "Ladies, this is Cameran, Jules's new girlfriend."

Cameran nodded a greeting, and everyone else gave similar hellos. A waitress came by with a bottle of champagne and flutes for everyone. Claire smiled wide when she lifted her glass. "To Ladies' Night."

We all lifted our glasses and took sips. I tried not to gag at the taste of it. I was not a fan of champagne and never had been. I liked wine fine enough but was happy enough with a Jack and Coke to sip on. I had no plans to drink more than one glass as the designated driver for the evening, so I could keep my wits about me.

"So, Cameran," Hannah started. "What do you do?"

"Well, I—"

“She owns that charming little café I told you about downtown. It’s near the building I was showing,” Claire cut in. Cameran tensed beside me, and I reached down to take her hand in solidarity.

I would have described Cameran’s café as charming as well because it was. It was the type of quirky that felt comforting—like you were stepping into something that showed the owner’s soul. But the way the word came out of Claire’s mouth, it was clear it didn’t have the same feeling. I wasn’t about to sit here and let Cameran be belittled and disrespected.

“Hey, babe,” I asked, turning to her. “Do you want to dance?”

Cameran looked over at me. “Sure,” she replied. “If you all don’t mind?”

Claire’s smile was more of a grimace, but I stood up before she could respond. I didn’t give a shit what her answer was. I knew it would be nothing more than grade A bullshit anyway. I picked up Cameran’s small purse as well so we could make a clean getaway if needed.

We made our way out of VIP, and I could feel the weight of the group’s gazes on the back of my neck. “Please tell me you don’t want to go back up there?”

Cameran’s smile was sharp. “Fuck no.”

Relief coursed through me, and I shook my head. “That group is toxic. I don’t know how I lasted as long as I did with them.”

“I don’t either,” she agreed as we wound ourselves into the crowd. I wasn’t sure if Claire could still see us, and I didn’t care, especially not when Cameran turned and faced me fully. “Did you really want to dance?”

“I mean, yes? Only if you want to, though,” I added quickly. “I said that to give us an excuse to get up, but we don’t have to if you’re not into it.”

Cameran’s smile was small, but she lifted her arms, placing them around my shoulders as the crowd pushed in around us. It was hot with the crush of bodies, and I could feel my skin start to dampen. It also meant Cameran’s smaller frame was pushed more fully against me as I stared down at her. It was an intimate feeling even with the sway of bodies around us.

The music was dark and full of bass. The thrum of it echoed across the floor and flooded up my body until I felt my skin practically vibrating with each pulse. I clutched Cameran’s bag in one hand and let the other

snake around her waist. Now that we were closer, I could see her cheeks also shimmered with color with each flick of the lights over us. Her body fit against mine like it was always meant to be there, and I pressed the purse against her shoulder blades, bringing her in closer until I could feel her chest rise and fall with each breath.

"You really do look amazing, Cam."

Her smile widened. "That's the second time you've called me that."

"Sorry."

"No, I like it."

Her fingers pressed against the back of my neck as we shifted with the crowd. Each brush brought us closer until I could feel the puff of her breath curling around my chin. Our gazes locked, and I wouldn't have been able to look away if I wanted to. Her skin shone with each pass of light, leaving her awash in color. She was like a star, brightly shining and almost too beautiful to look at. I could feel myself falling into her orbit with each breath we shared until my lips barely brushed against hers.

"Can I kiss you?" I asked, wanting to do it right this time. An unexpected kiss had started this thing between us, but I was ready to throw away the mask of fakeness and reveal my true wants. Claire didn't matter. Cameran was all I saw.

She didn't speak but nodded slowly as her fingers pressed against the back of my head, coaxing me further down. It wasn't needed, but my eyes fluttered at the feeling of her fingers winding through my hair. When our mouths met again, there was no uncertainty there, just the sweet sensation of her lips joining with mine. This was nothing like the first or even the second kiss. This kiss was possessive, and, combined with the grip against my skull, I felt held fast in Cameran's enchantment.

When she pulled away, I didn't stop myself from trying to follow. I opened my eyes slowly, focus darting down to the lips I wanted back against mine. I must have made some noise because she smiled before teasing me with another quick brush of her mouth.

"I think we should go somewhere else."

Her words were soft and half-muffled by the music that blared from the speakers, but I heard them easily. Everything in me was tuned to her, and I swore I could almost hear her thoughts as close as we were.

"So we can talk."

That stopped me cold.

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Chapter Eleven

Cameran

I gripped Julie's hand tightly as we left the dance floor, not bothering to stop back by Claire's booth. I didn't care if it was rude at this point. Keeping this charade going was ridiculous, and I knew I couldn't keep it up on my end any longer. I had to come clean and risk being turned down once and for all.

Julie didn't protest as she followed me out, but her silence was a bit worrying. A glance back at her revealed nothing even as we emerged from the club into the clearer air outside. She didn't release my hand, though, so I counted that as a win. She was even still carrying my small clutch, which I was glad for as I would have had no desire to go back in the club to retrieve it. The valet took her receipt and hurried off down the street.

"So, where do you want to go?"

The question wasn't unexpected, though I didn't quite have an answer. Well, that wasn't true. I wanted to bring her back to my place, but I wasn't sure if that was too forward. We hadn't even properly talked about everything, and I didn't want to make her uncomfortable, but I also didn't want to go to another bar where we wouldn't be able to have a conversation in peace.

If you're going to go for it, you might as well go all in.

My inner voice was right. If I was going to have this conversation, I needed to stop being so timid.

"We can go back to my place," I suggested, watching Julie's face closely to see how she felt about it. Her lips turned up in a smile, and she seemed to brighten at that.

“Trying to get me alone, are you?”

“Yes.”

I didn’t see the point in lying. Being alone with her was exactly what I wanted right now. It’s what I had been wanting for weeks, and my body thrummed with the anticipation of it.

Her car pulled up, and she once again opened the passenger side door for me. As soon as she was in the driver’s seat, I rattled off my address and hoped I hadn’t left too much of a mess. The moment with Sean had really been me freaking out about what to wear and needing his opinion. I vaguely remembered throwing a few dresses onto the closet floor in my bedroom, but I was pretty sure everything else looked okay.

The light from the streetlamps threw shadows into the car, and as always, my gaze was drawn to Julie. Her necklaces glimmered each time light hit them, and they drew my attention to her chest. She was wearing almost the same outfit that she had been the first time I saw her out, and it looked just as good if not better than before. The all-black made her look slightly dangerous, but the smile that spread across her lips was all sweet. It was an interesting set of contrasts that I was eager to explore. Despite having her as a customer for months, I didn’t know too much about her. I wanted to know what made her tick. What did she like? What did she dislike?

“I want to know everything,” I murmured, clamping my mouth shut when my words escaped without my consent.

“What?” Dark eyes glanced over at me, and I swallowed hard.

“Nothing,” I quickly replied, turning back to look out the front window. Thoughts turned over in my head as we turned onto my street, and by the time we pulled into my driveway, I felt like I had a game plan.

Julie turned off the car, but neither of us moved. This was a line we had not yet crossed. She had obviously been to my business, and I had been to her work, but being in one another’s personal space was new. As eager as I was to have her inside, my veins still thrummed with anxiety. My arms felt heavy, and I shook my hands slightly to get rid of the tiny pinpricks of pressure traveling up and down my fingers.

“If you want, I can—”

“Date me.” I winced at my verbal diarrhea as the words fell like bricks between us. That wasn’t exactly how I wanted to start the conversation, but it was out there now. Nothing I could do but power

through and hope I came out in one piece on the other side. “Not like this, but for real.”

Julie turned to me, eyes shadowed by the darkness in the car. Her expression was unreadable, and her mouth was parted as if she wasn’t sure what to say. The seconds trickled by, and I could feel the need to say more well up inside my chest.

“I mean,” I continued. “It wasn’t a demand. That was supposed to be a question. Will you date me? You can obviously say no.”

“I—”

“And if you say no, we can still be fake girlfriends. This doesn’t have to end now or anything.” My words were tumbling out in a rush, and the more they came, the more momentum they built until I didn’t think I would ever be able to reel them back in. “And you can still come by the café, of course. I wouldn’t stop you from coming. I would still want you to because I like you. I mean, obviously, I like you because—”

This time, my words were cut off, but by familiar lips pressing against mine. My stampede of thoughts paused; I could feel the rapid staccato beat of my pulse. Fingers danced across my face until I felt warm palms cup my cheeks. The feeling was electric and more than I had ever felt before. There was a growing need in me that wanted to feel everything in as many ways as possible.

“You should come in,” I whispered before taking a moment to sample from her lips again. My fingers gripped the front of her blouse, hooking on a button to keep myself anchored.

Julie’s groan echoed through me, but she took a deep breath in and moved back slightly. “I shouldn’t. I want to do this right.”

She opened her eyes, and the heat in them threatened to leave me speechless. Never had I been looked at this way before. It was like she wanted to devour me whole, and I was more than happy to let her. My inexperience still circled in the back of my mind, but my need kept my nerves at bay.

“If I come inside, I’ll do a lot of things right,” she said, brushing her fingers across my lower lip. Her gaze slid down, and I opened my mouth to let out a shuddery breath. I was ready to throw caution to the wind. “But I want…if we’re really doing this, I want to start our relationship off right. I want to get to know you.”

“I want to know you too,” I breathed out on a sigh as her hand fell away. It took me a few deep breaths before I was able to release the death grip I had on Julie’s shirt.

Even after we separated, neither of us moved to leave the car. The only sounds around us were the occasional car going by and our slow, steady breathing. Julie’s eyes were still on me, and my gaze was locked on her as I drank my fill of new possibilities. I hadn’t expected such a positive response, and now I wasn’t sure what to do next.

Finally, she broke our gaze and sighed.

“I should go.”

“What?” Had I messed up already? “No. Wait. Why?”

Her answering chuckle settled my nerves somewhat, but I still didn’t understand why she felt she had to go. I was pretty sure I had thrown out all the right signals to show I wanted her to stay. *Invited her inside. Twice. That should have been a loud and clear signal.*

“Because if I stay, I’ll ask to kiss you again, and if you say yes, I know I’ll never leave.” Her words sent the butterflies in my stomach pinballing against one another.

“I don’t mind,” I breathed out before I could stop myself. Julie’s answering smile was bright enough to light the sky, but she shook her head.

“Here’s what will hopefully happen,” she said softly. “I’m going to be chivalrous and walk you to your door, where I will give you a safe kiss goodnight before leaving. Then, tomorrow, I will call you, so we can have a real date where I can wine and dine you like you deserve and hope I’ll be allowed to sample a few more of your kisses. How does that sound to you?”

I smiled. “That sounds perfect.”

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Chapter Twelve

Julie

Driving away from Cameran had been hard as hell, and even after pulling into the garage at my condo, I was still fighting against everything in me that said to turn around and go back. She had been so sweetly wanting with her fingers tangled in my blouse and lips that were hot to the touch. It was the feeling of them against the whorls on my fingers that kept me satisfied enough not to lean in again.

Somehow, she had had the courage to do what I hadn't, and damn if that wasn't a fucking turn-on. She had always seemed so timid before, but this new confident Cameran was really working for me.

I rolled over in bed and reached out to grab my phone. I had texted her when I got home, and the heart eyes emoji she sent back had had me smiling as I drifted off to sleep. Now I looked over it and knew I needed to make this next move count. I didn't want to take her to the same places I used to frequent with Claire. I didn't want to risk running into any of our shared friends or Claire herself. I was serious when I talked about wanting a clean start so I could do this right.

My cell phone rang right as I pushed myself up, and I scowled when I saw who it was on the screen.

Claire.

"No way am I ruining my good mood by talking to you," I murmured, sending the call straight to voicemail. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing else she and I needed to discuss that hadn't already been said.

I put the phone down on my bedside table and ignored the subsequent pings. I'd let her get out all her texts before deleting them in one swoop. I didn't need to read them.

A shower had me ready to face the day, and I quickly got dressed before heading out to the living room. I opened my laptop, intent on looking up some places to potentially go, later today, when the phone rang again. I gritted my teeth and marched back into my bedroom, snatching the phone up.

"What?"

"Well, hello to you too."

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm myself down. "Sorry, Hailey. That wasn't meant for you."

"I figured as much," she replied. "Was the club that bad last night?"

I snorted. "Started off kind of shit, but you probably knew that was going to happen."

"If Claire was there, then yeah."

I shook my head, fondness spreading through my chest at how upset Hailey always got on my behalf. The woman made me want to pull my hair out at times, but I knew she would always have my back.

"But, the night ended alright. Cameran and I aren't fake dating anymore."

"What? Why? What happened?"

"Cool your jets, friend. We aren't fake dating because she asked to date me…for real."

The squeal Hailey let out had me pulling the phone away from my ear to keep my eardrum intact. Even with that, I couldn't stop myself from chuckling. I was more than a little pleased with the outcome regardless of how it had come about.

"Thank fuck for that," Hailey enthused. "And she asked you? I did not see that coming, but I'm glad that one of you had the ovaries to finally stop the charade. I owe Sean fifty bucks now, though."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Please don't tell me you two were betting on us this whole time."

"Of course, we were," she admitted with not even a hint of remorse in her tone. "He bet you two wouldn't last longer than a month before getting together. I thought it would take at least two for you to get your head out of your ass."

“Your support for me is astounding.”

“Shut up. I know you’re fucking ecstatic now that you can introduce her to your family.”

That had my heart thumping and not in an excited way. “Yeah, that will have to wait a while.” Her silence was full of judgment. “It’s not like I never plan to do it. Just…”

“Julie, you can’t be serious.”

“It’s not like it’s come up recently. And you remember how they reacted when I introduced Claire as a roommate.”

Hailey’s snort was loud across the phone line. “I firmly believe that’s because they didn’t like her in general.”

I shook my head. “They started asking me to go back to church with them after that. They hadn’t asked me to do that for years.” I flopped down on my couch. “I don’t plan on being in the closet with them forever, but I don’t want to rock the boat for something that’s not a sure thing.”

“Well, just make sure you tell Cameran that so she can decide if she’s willing to share a walk-in with you. Listen, why don’t we go get brunch and talk more?”

“Can’t. Promised Cameran I’d call her and take her out today.” I glanced at the clock, noting the time. If I was going to plan something, I needed to figure it out quickly. “But lunch tomorrow is on me.”

We got off the phone quickly, and I stared at the phone in my hand. Hailey had brought up a good point, but I was hesitant to drop any bombs so soon. I wanted Cameran to get to know me so she would want to stick around when the inevitable fallout of me telling my parents came. She and I hadn’t even been on our first real date yet. The heavier stuff could wait.

I flipped through my phone until I came on Cameran’s number. It was easier now to be my usual self, knowing she wanted the same thing as me. Now it was time to really pull out all the stops. I didn’t know what type of women she was used to dating, so I was going to assume that they were as spectacular as her and go hard.

My heart pounded as I listened to the phone ring, each one jolting my pulse that much higher. When the call connected and I heard Cameran’s sweet voice on the other end, a smile came unbidden to my lips.

“I promised you I’d take you out today.”

“I wasn’t sure if that was real, or maybe I dreamed it up,” she replied. I chuckled as I thought just how similar we were in that regard.

“So, you dream about me?” I couldn’t help but flirt a little now that I knew it was welcome. Our teasing conversation in the café from before we hatched our fake dating plan had been on my mind, and I had originally wondered if I was imagining the reciprocation. Thankfully, it was clear now that flirting wasn’t only welcome; it was enthusiastically encouraged. Cameran’s giggle was sweet and drifted over me like the warmest breeze.

“I can tell you’re going to be trouble.”

“I’m not the only one,” I countered, thinking back to the syrupy sweet kisses that had nearly done away with my control last night. “But listen, I want to make good on taking you out. Is there anywhere, in particular, you’ve been wanting to go, or should I surprise you?”

She hummed softly before answering. “Surprise me. But…” Her voice trailed off, and I could hear some of her timidness creeping in. As much as I liked her either way, I didn’t want her to lose the confidence she had been displaying with me. This new side I was seeing of her was sexy, and I wanted to draw it out as much as possible.

“But what?” I asked gently, not wanting her to feel pressured. “Today is all about me getting to know you, so feel free to ask for anything.” *Because I will have no problems giving it to you.*

“Can we go somewhere you and Claire haven’t been before?” The question was more surprising than it probably should have been, considering how this all began. I didn’t want to run into Claire as it was, so I was more than happy to agree to that.

“I think I know just the place. Any food allergies or things you like to avoid?”

“Nope. I’m easy.” I lifted an eyebrow at that wording. I doubted Cameran was easy, but I was looking forward to testing that theory. “Should I wear anything special?”

“Nah. Just wear what feels comfortable. I’ll be there to pick you up in, say, an hour?”

“Perfect.”

We didn’t waste time on a long, drawn-out goodbye, and I punched the air in success. Claire would have told me she wanted to go to the most expensive place she could think of, so being able to choose something less highbrow and more my own speed was a relief. I thought Cameran might like it too; at least, I hoped so.

~*~*~

“Oh! An arcade.”

I smiled at Cameran’s enthusiasm as we walked into the building. Taking Claire here had never been an option for more reason than just because she would have hated it. This was the place I always used as my escape when I needed to let my mind drift so I could reset for another tough workweek. Hailey had come with me a few times, but normally, it was just me alone with the tinkling of old-school pinball machines and a couple of beers.

“I didn’t even know there were still arcades that weren’t like modern restaurants with games just for kids.”

The smile that split my lips hurt my cheeks from how wide it was. I couldn’t help how pleased I was by her reaction. This place was my safe space, and her response to it had me beaming.

“I found this place during college randomly. I’ve been coming back ever since.” I steered her over to the bar. “They actually have really good food and beers, and the games are all under a dollar to play.”

Cameran smiled up at me. “Well, I hope you’re ready to lose some cash because I kick butt at Pac-Man.” She winked at me before sauntering ahead, and I hung back for a few moments to watch her. When she glanced at me over her shoulder, my smile morphed into a smirk, and I knew it was on.

I joined her at the bar and leaned into her just enough to feel her warmth. “Perhaps we should make this a friendly competition then,” I said lowly. My blood was singing with the thought of going head-to-head with her, even if it was just for a few friendly wagers.

“Are you sure you want me to embarrass you at your favorite place?”

I raised my eyebrows. Her lips were quirked up in a teasing smirk of her own. This woman was something else, and I was looking forward to seeing just how far her competitive streak could go.

“My favorite barista has teeth.”

“I’ve got sugar and spice,” she replied. “Less talk. More play.”

I grinned and pulled out my wallet. “Oh, you are so on.”

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Chapter Thirteen

Cameran

Anticipation thrummed through me as we grabbed our drinks and walked over to the Pac-Man machine. I had been excited when Julie called since I hadn't expected her to call so soon, even after she had said she would last night. The secretive way she hadn't mentioned where we were going had caught my attention, but the reveal of our destination had me giddier than a kid getting their first PlayStation.

Old-school arcades were very much a thing I liked, and I was glad Julie saw fit to do something relatively low-key for our first real date. Of course, that didn't mean I would reward her by going easy on her while we played. The third time I robbed her of a power-up, she let out an undignified yelp and narrowed her eyes at me.

"Really?"

A shrug and a sharp smile had her laughing loudly, and I preened at the sound of it. This Julie was different than she was in the café every morning and the woman I had danced with last night. Then, she always seemed uncomfortable and slightly aloof, like I wouldn't be able to reach into the depths of who she really was. This Julie was soft and reachable, and I delighted in every curse and groan she let out as we continued our friendly competition. Now, as we faced off for another round, she seemed open and carefree. I wanted to see her like this always.

I shifted slightly until we were connected, shoulder to shoulder, occasionally jostling one another when we made a move. It was comfortable in a way I wasn't expecting, not because I wasn't comfortable around Julie, but because I wasn't expecting a date to be this easy. This

moment had been built up so much in my head that now that it was here, it was far less daunting than I thought it would be.

"Are you going easy on me?" I asked with a smile as I watched her character get eaten by a ghost. "I thought you said you were good at this."

Julie chuckled. "Maybe I want to lull you into a false sense of security before I destroy you. I don't want you calling it quits too soon."

"Uh-huh," I replied, my snort of amusement dripping with sarcasm. "If you say so."

It was then I got an idea. I wasn't sure if it was a good one or if it would be considered playing dirty, but once it popped into my head, I knew I had to try.

I kept my eyes on the game, pretending that it had all my focus as I leaned further against her. Her frame took my extra weight easily, and she shifted to compensate but said nothing. The perfume she had on was spicy with a hint of sweetness, like salted caramel against my tongue. It was the type of scent I wanted to bottle up to capture its uniqueness.

"You okay?"

The question snapped me back to what I was doing, and I glanced up at her, feigning innocence.

"Yes. Are you?"

She cocked an eyebrow at me but nodded and turned her attention back to the game. I smirked when we both went for a power-up and giggled at Julie's curse when I once again reached it first. I decided to implement part two of my move.

I reached over with my left hand and brushed my fingers over her bare arm. The goosebumps left in my wake had my inner voice crowing in triumph, and when I saw her glance over at me, confusion on her face, I pulled my hand away and focused back on the screen.

"Oh, it's going to be like that?"

Her question drew a smirk from me. "Like what?"

Julie snorted like she knew exactly what game I was pulling, and I didn't doubt she probably did.

"Okay. Two can play at that game, baby, so I hope you're playing to win."

Her words had me swallowing hard at the idea of winning anything with her. I hadn't thought that far, but the excitement I felt at the possibilities helped fuel my response.

“I don’t know what games you’ve been playing,” I replied. “But I always play to win.”

Our rivalry continued as we moved from one game to another, and with each one, we stayed in one another’s orbit until my arm tingled with how often we brushed together. Affected wasn’t the half of it. Every part of me was vibrating with the anticipation brought from each glance until I was on another wavelength. I almost collapsed with disappointment when we ran out of quarters, and Julie suggested pausing for food. It wasn’t until I was groaning at the flavor of a perfectly grilled burger exploding on my tongue that the feeling lessened, and I smiled.

“This is like heaven in my mouth.”

Julie laughed even after making a sound of appreciation when she bit into hers.

“I told you. This place is great. They host trivia nights here too.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. “You didn’t strike me as a trivia night person.”

“Oh?”

I shook my head. “No offense, but I thought you were the type to only go to expensive places, which isn’t a bad thing,” I iterated quickly, hoping I hadn’t just put my foot in my mouth.

She shrugged. “I like those places sometimes, but usually I’m happy to stick to bars and this place.” Her expression twisted like she was remembering something not so great. “Claire usually chose where we went, so that’s probably why.”

I nodded in understanding. Conversation continued to flow, and the more I got to see the real Julie, the more I found I liked her. She was sarcastic but not in a mean way. She and Sean were more alike than either of them would probably want to admit.

“So, I had to go to a random part of campus, and then, my little sister Anna comes crawling out of a bush, leaves and twigs stuck in her hair and everything, and she jumps in my car yelling for me to go before campus police showed up.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Did you ever tell your parents?”

“Of course not. I’m the oldest. They probably would have blamed me for it,” Julie said with a shake of her head. “But I am holding that information in case I need blackmail material sometime down the road.”

We both took sips of our beers before she continued, this time turning the question of siblings on me.

"What about you? Any siblings?"

I nodded. "I have an older brother, Roderick." My smile came unbidden when I thought about him, and I shook my head. "He's finishing his medical residency out in Seattle, but I'm hoping I can convince him to move back here if only so he and Sean can stop tap dancing around each other and making me play the worst game of telephone."

Julie snorted. "That must make things interesting."

I wrinkled my nose. "That's one way to put it." She reached out and snatched a fry off my plate. "Thief."

Her smile slid into a smirk. "You don't mind sharing with me, do you?" She bit into the fry, teeth glinting at me, and I narrowed my eyes at her.

"This plate is for winners," I replied, cupping my hands around it with a pointed look. "But, if you want to try again to best me, maybe I'll share a few with you."

She shifted out of her seat. "After you then."

She must have been holding back before when we played because we were a lot more evenly matched in each subsequent game. It only took a few losses before we started trying to distract one another with jostles and fiddling with the other person's joysticks. It was when I reached over in one such move that Julie caught my hand in hers. She glanced at me with an arched brow but didn't release me. Instead, she intentionally crashed her character and took a step toward me, never letting go of my hand.

"Let's see how good you are now," she whispered, her breath curling around the shell of my ear as she leaned into me. A shiver went up my spine, and the hairs on my arms stood at attention. I swallowed hard and tried to turn my focus back on the game. It wasn't difficult to use one hand, or it wouldn't have been if not for the gentle pressure of Julie's thumb rubbing against the back of my hand. It was like every nerve in my body was attached to that small strip of skin.

The air was charged as we continued, and I licked my lips as Julie let out a little cheer beside me when I beat the level. What had started as just competition was slowly morphing into something else and leaving me off-kilter in the best way. The anticipation was thick as I eventually lost my final life and stood up straight from where I had been slightly hunched over

the machine. I hazarded a glance in Julie's direction and saw she was looking at me.

Having her full attention was addictive, and I turned to face her. "What next?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Well, there's a photo booth over there." She tilted her head. "We could take a few as a take-home souvenir."

I bit my bottom lip as I thought about what that would mean. Julie and I in an enclosed space.

Together.

We wouldn't be completely alone, of course, but the heavy curtain would provide some sense of privacy. I squeezed her hand tightly as I took a deep breath in. Her smirk slipped slightly into something softer.

"Hey." She brought my hand up and brushed her lips over the back of it. "We don't have to. Seriously. I'm having a blast just playing games with you."

I shook my head. "It's not that I don't want to," I breathed out, hoping to explain to her how I was feeling. "I want to. I just don't want to push."

She frowned. "Push? So far, I think I've been the pushy one," she replied, holding up our hands.

"But I started the flirting."

"And I returned it," she pointed out. "Flirting is great, Cam. It lets me know you're into this—into me."

"I am," I insisted. "Into you."

I just don't know how to do this without worrying I'm getting it wrong.

That same old insecurity in me was resurfacing, and for a moment, I wondered if I should tell Julie that I was embarrassingly new at this. How was I supposed to tell her that not only was she the first woman I had dated, but the first person, period? Was it something you divulged on a first date or was that more of a third date kind of topic? I should have asked Sean.

"That's good to know." Julie's smile returned. "If you couldn't tell, I'm into you too."

My breath hitched, and for a split second, I almost forgot how to breathe. Screw insecurity. I gripped her hand tightly and turned, pulling her along with me as I marched us over to the photo booth. I heard her let out a half-hearted protest, but she didn't resist, and her smile was wider when we

stopped in front of it. I could see a couple people looking at us with curious expressions, but all I cared about was getting in and shutting us away from the world. Julie pulled out a few bills from her wallet, and soon enough, we were hidden away from prying eyes.

It was brighter inside the booth than I had thought it would be, but it was clean. We sat on the bench facing a screen with instructions, and there was a bucket with props in front of us.

“So, which ones do you—”

I dropped her hand and quickly cupped Julie’s face in my hands and brought her lips to mine. The kiss was off until a hand came up to cup my chin, angling my head slightly. Once our lips slotted more fully together, it was like flashes going off behind my eyelids. It took me a moment to realize there really were flashes going off.

Julie pulled away with a chuckle, but she didn’t go far, instead leaning forward to press our foreheads together. She opened her eyes, and they crinkled at the sides with the force of her smile. It was impossible for me not to smile back as another flash went off.

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Chapter Fourteen

Julie

Cloud fucking nine.

That's what I was on as I looked over the pictures in my hand. The memory of soft, sweet kisses and a warm palm in mine was the only thing keeping me from being clingy as hell and calling Cameran. The date yesterday had been one of the best I had gone on in a long time, and while Cameran's jump from competitive to almost timid was still a little confusing, I was enjoying getting to know her. Keeping our kisses to a publicly safe level was difficult, but the knowledge that she wanted more calmed my need.

I really did want to do this right and not just because her coffee was far better than the instant shit we had at work. Her combination of earnestness and almost innocence was intoxicating. I knew I couldn't be casual about this, though, and that was another thing that had me keeping things from getting too heavy too quickly. A knock on my door pulled me from my musings.

I opened the door and sighed. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in class or something?"

My younger sister, Anna, pushed past me and into the apartment. "Who has classes on a Sunday?" She was making herself comfortable on my couch by the time I had the door shut behind me. I internally groaned when I saw her holding the pictures of Cameran and me.

"Who is this?" She glanced up at me with a raised brow. "She's cute."

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied, reaching for the pictures. “Again, what are you doing here?”

She let me take the pictures back without much of a fight, but I knew her curiosity was nowhere near sated. “I just came to inform you that we are expected at home next week.”

“What? Why?”

“Didn’t mom tell you?”

I sat down on the couch. “Tell me what?”

Anna frowned. “Our grandparents are coming to visit.”

“What? When?”

“In like, two weeks. They’re staying for like a month. Don’t you ever check the fucking Kakao group chat?”

I groaned and stood up to go check my phone. I was terrible about checking our family’s group chat because half the time, they weren’t talking about anything I was interested in. It was nice to occasionally hear about how our extended family was doing here in the States and back in Korea, but most of the time, I briefly skimmed a message and then ignored the replies.

This time, I had to back up a few weeks to see where this bit of information was mentioned.

“Shit.”

“Yup,” Anna replied, popping the P. “You didn’t respond, so I thought I should give you a heads up. They’re staying with mom and dad too, so you know we have to be over there whenever we are summoned.”

I knew the routine well enough. It had been a few years since we had to do it, though, since our grandparents weren’t able to visit that often.

“You going to bring your new friend to meet the elders?”

I gave her a look, letting her know exactly what I thought about that suggestion. Was she trying to start family drama? No one pushed guilt like our mother, and even at twenty-seven, I wasn’t ready to deal with the fallout my little secret would bring. I had already gotten a taste of it when introducing Claire as my “platonic” roommate, and no amount of Hailey’s words to the contrary would convince me that they hadn’t been suspicious and upset in that moment.

Their responses had confirmed what I already knew. They were not welcoming of my sexuality, and until I was ready to risk them cutting contact, I had to keep any future partners under wraps. It wasn’t common in

our mom's family for women to be so focused on their career, but it was the angle I was using for now. I had a few cousins in our dad's family who were doing similar, so it helped me insist to the Korean side of our family that it was just an American thing.

"I will definitely not be bringing Cameran anywhere near our family for a while."

"Ugh, fine. You're no fun. Hey, you have any food? I haven't eaten since breakfast."

I waved her over to the kitchen and tried not to think too much about a future that might not even happen. It was a lost cause. All I could imagine was years down the line, still trying to explain to my family why my 'roommate' and I still lived together and neither of us wanted to get married. I knew that shit wouldn't fly long-term, but I also wasn't sure when I would be ready to cross the bridge of coming out with it.

It was a thought that stayed with me in the days after our date. I found myself being pulled closer to her with each interaction like gravity was fighting to keep us in one another's orbit. Flirting had always been fun for me, but with Cameran, it took on new meaning. My eyes would drink in her responses, and each head tilt or bashful smile had me skipping to work and feeling like a schoolgirl with a crush.

You pretty much are.

I ignored my inner voice and tried to focus on the files in front of me. There was a big deadline coming up, and everyone on the project was growing more and more stressed out. This was a big one, and if it was missed or something went wrong, it could ripple down the line, creating other issues and delaying our finalization date. The knock on my door broke my concentration, and I frowned as I looked up.

"Hey, back down, Cujo. I'm only bringing you lunch," Hailey said, holding up her hands. The scent of fries wafted over to me, and my stomach voiced its anger at having been forgotten for the past few hours. I glanced at my clock and realized it was already past noon.

"Damn." I dropped the papers and leaned back in my chair, stretching out my back for the first time in probably hours. "I almost forgot about lunch."

Hailey walked in. "Not almost; you did forget." She placed a bag on my desk and sat down in the chair across from me. "I texted you like an

hour ago, but I saw you were deep in it when I walked by, so I figured I would bring something up."

I dug into the bag like a woman possessed, my mouth watering at the scent of parmesan fries and what I knew would be a damn good burger. "I've asked before, but are you sure you aren't into women?" I looked up at her with a grateful grin. "I make a pretty good girlfriend."

She snorted and pulled a second set of fries out of another bag. "Thanks, but no thanks. We would probably kill each other by the second day."

"Accurate," I agreed before digging in. I let out a sigh of relief when the flavors hit my tongue, and neither of us spoke for a while as we enjoyed our meals. It wasn't until I was halfway done with destroying my burger that Hailey spoke up again.

"So, a little birdie told me your SoKo fam is coming to town." She looked up at me gaze, giving nothing away. "How are you feeling about that?"

I chewed slowly as I thought about my answer. This wasn't a new conversation. It came up every time my mom's parents came to visit, and I always had the same answers, which were non-answers essentially. Hailey didn't completely understand my hesitation, and I got why. Her parents, hell, pretty much her whole family was as socially liberal as you could get. If Hailey showed up with a girlfriend one day, neither of her parents would bat an eye at it. My familial situation was as far from that as possible on both sides of the aisle.

My dad's side was the quintessential Black Southern Baptist family, and my mom's side was Catholic. They got along with one another well enough, and they all seemed to feel exactly the same when it came to homosexuality.

It was a big fucking no-no.

Growing up, we dutifully went to church every Sunday, switching off between the Korean Mass my maternal aunts and cousins went to and the church in Stone Mountain my paternal family grew up in. Neither felt comfortable to me once I realized where my romantic attractions laid. I stopped going to either in college unless summoned for some special event, so now I only attended once every few years. There were inclusive churches in Atlanta that welcomed everyone no matter their orientation, but overall, I wasn't too keen on attending anything.

I sighed again and shook my head. “Feeling the same as I always do—excited as hell to see them and not excited to stuff myself back in the closet when I do.”

Hailey hummed. “Would it really be so bad if you came out? Maybe just to your parents at least? I mean, your sister and brother already know, and they’re fine with it.”

My snort was loud and clearly unamused. “You have never had guilt laid onto you by a Korean mom or a Black Southern grandma. It’ll have you rethinking your entire existence, and I am not ready for a crisis of that magnitude.”

She sighed. “You have to come out sometime, Julie. Seriously. When are you going to let yourself be happy?”

I swallowed down the defensive words that normally shot out of me when we discussed this. I knew she was trying to be a good friend and just wanted me to be happy, but I wasn’t ready for the confrontation that I knew would ensue. I wanted love, but I also wanted my parents to be there for me in life. The decision to stay quiet about this part of my life had been so much easier when I wasn’t in a relationship.

“And as sweet as Cameran is,” Hailey continued, bringing up the point that was no doubt what she really wanted to get at, “I doubt she wants to stay a secret for her entire life. The breakup with Claire was a good thing, but as much as I hate to admit it, she did have a point when it came to her feeling like your dirty little secret.”

All the moisture left my mouth then, and the half-chewed burger between my teeth turned to tasteless ash. I grimaced as I fought the urge to spit it out and wash the taste away. Hailey’s expression was determined, but there was also a thread of concern there that I had been seeing more and more as of late. I knew she wanted to help, but all this conversation was doing was putting me off my lunch. I had to change the subject.

“Well, what about you and Leon? When are you guys going to finally get engaged?”

I knew the change in topics was obvious, and for a moment, Hailey looked like she wanted to call me out on it. I breathed out slowly when she didn’t and knew I had been granted only a momentary reprieve. One day soon, I was going to have to figure out my final plans, but I hopefully would have plenty of time to brace myself before then.

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Chapter Fifteen

Cameran

My smile was dopey. I could tell from Sean's rolling eyes and disgusted expression. I couldn't help myself from being on cloud nine, even days after the weekend was spent texting with Julie, staring at our pictures from the photo booth, and recalling our kisses.

I thought about sex as much as the next person, but my thoughts and fantasies had been going into overdrive the past few days. It didn't help that now, when Julie came into the café, there was a sweet, subtle tension underlying our glances and words. She flirted openly now, and while it occasionally caught me off guard, I returned it with teasing words and looks of my own.

"Dear god, please tell me y'all have a date scheduled sometime soon?"

I giggled. "Yeah. Tonight. There's a jazz concert Julie is going to take me to."

"Great. Make sure the night ends with some fucking, so I can stop suffocating on the unresolved sexual tension between y'all." He grimaced. "That shit lingers in the air for hours after Julie leaves."

I felt my cheeks heat, and I hissed at him to shut up. Truthfully, I would love to explore more of the tension between Julie and me, but I was still hesitant. Us moving slowly was fine with me because it gave me more time to prepare. I didn't want to suck at sex my first go-round. What if I was so bad at it she never wanted to have sex with me again?

I wasn't ashamed to say I had done a little research, though the porn selections initially were more than a little disappointing. I cupped my own

cheeks, the heat in them making me wince internally. If I couldn't even think about sex without turning into a blushing virgin, how the hell was I going to attempt to have it?

"Sean."

He groaned before rolling his head toward me. "No."

"But I need help," I whined. This was an emergency of epic proportions, and I refused to talk to Rod about it. "I can't ask Rod about this."

"Why not? He fucks women."

"Not anymore, you know that. And plus, he'll want to have more awkward conversations like asking about Julie's intentions and feelings. He would probably try to make us Skype call just to read her the riot act." I shuddered as I thought about Julie's reaction to dealing with an overprotective brother. "With you, it can just be about the sex."

Sean frowned. "Are you calling me a whore?"

"Sean, I'm serious." My voice went alarmingly high, and I could see when he finally broke.

"Ugh, fine. What do you want to know?"

"How do I seduce her?" I turned my lips down. "I mean, we're dating now, and we kiss and everything, but I want her to know that I'm fine with doing more."

"Well—"

"But I also want her to know that I'm fine with not doing more too," I cut in. "I don't want to pressure her into anything."

"Okay, then—"

"But I think we can get to know each other even if we go further than just holding hands and a few kisses, which are pretty spectacular on their own. I just... I don't want her to feel she has to hold back, you know?"

"You going to let me get a word in edgewise?" he asked with a cocked brow. His lips were quirked up in a familiar smile, and I immediately shut my mouth with a click. I tended to word-vomit when nervous.

"Right. Sorry."

Sean shook his head, but his face showed he was clearly amused by my rambling.

"Now. I get what you're trying to say, but first, let me ask because I have to do my Rod-style due diligence; otherwise, he'll be after my ass and

not in the fun way. Are you absolutely sure you're ready to have sex?"

I groaned. "Sean, I'm twenty-five, not a child."

"Okay, and? It's still a new experience for you, and you've never been in a rush before, so I have to ask."

I knew he was just trying to be a good friend, and honestly, it was a question I had been asking myself the past few days. He was right in that I had never been in a rush before to lose my virginity. I wasn't saving it for a special reason, and it didn't have some big meaning for me. I just knew myself, and I knew I would get attached easily. I wasn't afraid of giving someone my body, but I was a little afraid of giving someone my heart.

But Julie seemed different than the few people who had expressed interest in me in the past. I wanted her like I'd never wanted anyone before. It felt right.

"I'm sure," I replied softly. I looked up at Sean and repeated myself more firmly. "I'm sure I'm ready for sex with Julie."

He nodded. "Then tell her how you feel." At my look, he shrugged. "There's no grand way to do this. I mean, you can make it a big deal if you want. But I would just go with explaining you've never had sex but want to know if she is interested. If you stress that it won't negatively impact y'all dating, it should be fine."

"No way," I exclaimed, slapping a hand over my mouth when my voice carried further than I had planned. A few patrons looked over at us before returning back to their books and screens. I grimaced and pitched my voice lower.

"Yes, I'll tell her I'm ready, but there is no way in hell I'm telling her I'm a virgin. What if she laughs at me?"

"If she laughs at you, then she's not a person you should be dating."

That was true, but I pushed the thought away. "What if she doesn't want to have sex with someone who has no experience?"

"Same answer, sis."

"I'm serious."

"And so am I," he countered. "If she doesn't want to have sex with you for such pointless reasons, then she's not worth it, period. You're a cutie with a big heart and a big ass, and you'll learn what she likes the same way she'll learn what you like. No one pops out of the womb knowing how to fuck, hon."

I sighed but couldn't deny the truth of his words.

“I get that,” I said. “But I don’t want to seem like some blushing virgin who was waiting on her Princess Charming to get deflowered. I have plenty of sex, just with myself.”

Sean held up a hand. “Okay. First of all, ew.”

“You bought me my first vibrator as a birthday present.”

“Doesn’t mean I want to know you use it,” he countered. “Secondly, just be yourself and talk to the woman. If she is worth you, she won’t even think twice about your lack of person-on-person experience.”

“Right,” I replied, nodding slowly.

“And if she does say some fuck shit, I’ll spit in her coffee.”

~*~*~

I sighed as I popped a grape in my mouth. The evening was warm and a little sticky, but with the faint music carrying on the breeze and Julie lounging on the blanket beside me, I was more than content.

The jazz band was playing a relaxing melody, leaving the crowd enraptured with each note. Most people had brought lawn chairs or at least blankets to stretch out on, similar to the one Julie and I occupied. I hadn’t been expecting her to pull out a picnic basket of fresh fruit, meats, cheeses, and wine, but I was more than a little enamored. As we sipped wine and let the notes wash over us, we talked a little, and with each piece of her life she revealed, I felt myself falling deeper into her sway. Her brown eyes were bright, her smile warm and inviting as she told stories about her siblings and their trips overseas to visit family.

“What about you?” Julie asked, drawing my attention away from where I was admiring a bead of sweat meandering its way across her clavicle.

“Me?”

“Any overseas travelling?”

I nodded. “I’ve been to a few places, mostly in Europe. My family and I spent a month in Malaga, Spain, a few years ago, and it was wonderful. The food was so good.” My smile was wide as I remembered the trip. Rod had only been able to join us for a week, so we made sure to

do as much as possible then, visiting multiple restaurants and eating until I thought we would pop.

"I normally don't take such long trips now that I have the café," I continued. "Sean can cover things just fine, but I always feel bad about leaving him to do everything for too long."

Julie nodded, her gaze not leaving me. "I can see that. It must be hard to find some time off when you have to run a business with actual employees."

"It can be, yeah." I thought about how many trips I could take if I worked a normal nine-to-five job, but the thought of being in a cubicle never appealed to me. The café was my baby.

"What are you thinking about?"

The question drew my attention, and I blinked quickly. "What do you mean?"

Julie's smile was soft, and she turned onto her side to face me completely. "Just then," she replied. "You got this faraway look in your eyes, and your smile was so sweet."

"Oh." There went my cheeks heating again, and I swore one of these days my skin would actually turn bright red and embarrass the hell out of me. "Just thinking about the café. I almost didn't start it, you know. Sean and Rod helped talk me into it."

She propped her head on her hand and reached out to grab another rectangle of cheese. I was enraptured as I watched her bring it up between her lips, and I almost missed what she said next.

"What was holding you back?"

I shook myself out of it and focused on actually having a conversation and not just staring hungrily at her lips. "I didn't want to fail."

Julie nodded. "Fair enough. Most small businesses do, but you seem to be rocking it."

My chest warmed at the praise, and I shrugged. "We were lucky to be able to afford a great location with built-in clientele already. Plus, Sean studied culinary arts, so his pastries are amazing."

"And the barista slash owner is pretty damn cute. It's what drew me in."

I giggled softly, not knowing what to do with that compliment. Thankfully, I didn't say something ridiculous like 'you too,' but it still left me flailing. We fell silent, both of us watching each other as the sounds of

others talking quietly and music playing slowly filtered in around us. Julie's gaze was intense and settled on me like the hottest caress. I almost squirmed beneath it, not sure how to get from where we were to where I wanted us to be.

Should I kiss her? Would that be okay?

I took a deep breath, ready to make a move when she beat me to it. The blanket rustled as Julie pushed herself up.

"Hey. Come closer to me."

She moved the picnic basket down and patted the blanket beside her. I didn't want to seem too eager, so I slowly shifted over until I was tucked into the curve of her side. Her arm settled around my waist, her hand resting lightly against my hip. The spicy scent of her perfume curled around me, and I took a deep breath in, holding that aroma in my lungs until I knew I would be able to pick it out of a crowd.

Julie was hot and real, and suddenly, all my reasons for being timid no longer mattered.

I leaned into her more fully and turned my head, brushing a kiss against the line of her jaw. I felt rather than heard her suck a breath in, and the reaction had me internally cheering. I could do this. I could make my intentions clear without having to divulge my virginal status. The hand against my hip pressed, pulling me tighter against her.

"We don't have to," she rumbled, her skin vibrating against my lips. "I just want to be close to you, but we don't have to do anything."

"What if I want to?" I whispered against her skin, enjoying the deep flush that was spreading with each second that ticked by. I reached up and brushed my fingers against her chin. "We don't have to do anything if you don't want, but please don't hold back because of me."

"I want to do this right," she said quietly as she leaned down. Her lips were a hair's breadth away, and my gaze was drawn to them. I wanted to capture them with mine and press against their softness, but I didn't want to push Julie farther than she was willing to go.

"Right is whatever we want it to be," I replied simply. "Going further won't change that I want to learn everything about you. Not in a creepy stalker way, of course. I want to know whatever you want me to know."

Her chuckle kept my anxiety at bay, and when her other hand came up and cupped my cheek, I leaned into the touch with a sigh. This part

seemed so effortlessly easy. Maybe Sean was right about just talking it out.

"As long as we're honest and open with one another, we're doing it right." I felt the air stir between us and let my eyes slip closed. I couldn't get this last part out while looking at her. "And if that includes getting to know you in bed, even better."

I felt Julie's pause like a physical ache, and I almost took the words back. Pillow-soft lips pressed against mine, and the relief I felt ignited a spark in me. Everything melted away as I leaned into Julie. My fingers slid down to clutch at her shoulder, and my other arm shook where it was propping me up on the blanket.

Heat, pure and uncontained, roared through me as our mouths moved against one another. I let out a soft noise of pleasure, and it was returned by the touch of a tongue against my top lip begging entrance. I didn't hesitate to part my lips, letting it in to brush against mine. Julie tasted of sweetness and the sharp bite of cheddar, and I pushed my tongue forward to get more. I swept in, laying claim to her mouth and delighting in the moaned vibrations that greeted me. I could have happily sipped from her lips forever.

The crash of a cymbal brought back my awareness of where we were, and I realized that not only were we making out in a crowd of people and families, I was also gripping Julie's shoulder tight enough to bruise. I loosened my grip and slowly eased my lips away, ignoring my noisy pants of breath. Thankfully, Julie seemed to have been as deep in the moment as me. Her cheeks were flushed a deep rose, and her lips were puffy and stained wine-red. Her eyes opened when I pulled away, and the heat in them nearly undid my self-control.

"We should probably stop before we get arrested for indecency," I said, my voice gone deeper with passion. Julie leaned in, and for a moment, I thought she was going to ignore my words and kiss me again. I was ready to give into it, but she leaned past me and rested her forehead against my shoulder. I felt her take a deep breath in, the air rushing past the heated skin of my neck and making me shiver.

"You're right," she replied. "But damn, it would be so worth it just to have you kiss me like that again."

Oh, fuck this. I'm going for it.

I leaned into her and let my lips brush against her ear. "Well, if you take me home, I'll kiss you wherever and however you like."

“Fuck.” Her groan was the perfect melody to the evening, and I knew when she leaned back and looked at me, I had gotten my wish.

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Chapter Sixteen

Julie

My hands trembled slightly as I pulled into Cameran's driveway. The kiss we'd shared had been replaying in my mind the entire drive, and it hadn't helped that her hand rested on my inner thigh, occasionally squeezing as if just to let me know it was there.

As if I could ever fucking forget.

I was surprised when no one called security on us for almost humping one out on the blanket. We had gotten a few stares and a few knowing grins as we packed up and made our way away from the grounds, but I wouldn't even have cared if someone did have something to say. Cameran's hand had been in mine as soon as we stood, and that warm assurance was more than enough to keep my attention. When she had said her speech about being okay with moving things forward, I had been ready to reassure her it wasn't needed. But the soft kisses pressed against my jaw, an area that never failed to get me crossing my legs in need, had choked those words back.

Cameran was right. I wanted to get to know her, and no matter what the sex was like, that wouldn't change. We could work on learning what each other liked, though I was fairly certain that with the amount of tension between us, both of us would be going off like fucking bottle rockets with the first touch. I knew I wouldn't need more than a little rubbing to get the first one out, at least.

"You okay?"

Cameran's tone made me realize I had already turned the car off but was sitting with my keys in my hand. I turned to her and smiled at the

concern in her beautiful brown eyes.

"Yeah," I replied. She didn't look convinced, and movement caught my eye. I looked down when she bit her bottom lip, and that little move had me remembering what it felt like to have that plush mouth against mine.

All about honesty, right?

"I'm just thinking about all the things I would love to do with you," I continued, letting my gaze drift up her face until we locked eyes. I switched my keys to my other hand so I could reach out and brush my thumb over her lip, pulling it from between her teeth. The little indention from the pressure drew me in, and I leaned forward, touching my tongue to that heat. A soft moan drifted from between her slightly parted lips, and I smiled slowly.

"We should get inside." Cameran blinked sluggishly before nodding. When she didn't move or pull away, I chuckled and placed a chaste kiss on her lips. "Come on. I'm excited to see if your place looks like the café."

That seemed to shake her, and she moved away. "Right. Yeah." She glanced at me one last time before opening the door and getting out, and I took a deep breath before following. I stood close behind her as she fumbled with her keys at the door, and it was adorable how she glanced behind at me, her mouth quirked up in a small smile.

After she opened the door, she stepped in and gestured for me to follow. I grinned as I walked through the doorway, curious to learn more about her. We stepped into what was set up as a living or family room with a couple of oversized, comfortable-looking couches and a television that made me almost gag with envy.

"Would you like anything to drink?"

I turned my attention back to Cameran and shook my head. "I'm good. Plus, I don't want to drink anything that might hinder my memory of you hopefully being in my arms before the night is through."

"Oh," she breathed out. I could tell she was nervous by how her hands gripped one another, and I thought I had better dial it back a bit. If she was rethinking things, that was totally fine. I didn't want to make it seem like we had to keep going as we had been. "That's probably a good idea."

I nodded. "Though, if you want to just relax on the couch together and watch a movie, I'm fine with that too." Her gaze on me was intense, but I tried to seem cool and unaffected. I walked over to one of the couches and

sat down. I had been right about its comfort. The plush material wrapped around me like a cloud, and I sighed and leaned back.

"Plus, I think your couch just seduced me. I might have to stay here with her for a bit."

Cameran giggled and shook her head. "We've been together for less than a week, and already you're leaving me for someone else." She walked over and sat down beside me, a length of warmth down my side. "I didn't see that one coming."

I shifted, snuggling into the fabric, and shot her a teasing grin. "It's what happens when you have such good taste in couches." Taking a chance, I placed my left hand on her thigh and let it rest there. When her hand covered mine, I relaxed even further.

We sat there for a while, the silence comfortable between us, and I pondered on how new this was for me. None of my previous relationships had been this comfortable, especially not so soon. There was nervousness, of course, but being able to sit with nothing else to capture our attention without talking was a level of intimacy I had never achieved, not even in the three years Claire and I had been together. It was like Cameran and I didn't need to speak. I was content to just be around her, and from how she leaned into me, her breathing slow and steady, it seemed she felt the same.

"This is nice."

"What is?" I asked, turning my head slightly and breathing deeply. Her hair tickled my nose, and I wrinkled it and smiled, not pulling away. She smelled fruity, like mango and bananas, but with the slight bitter scent of the coffee beans that I had come to associate with her. It was intoxicatingly energizing and also made my stomach grumble with hunger.

"Just sitting…like this."

I smiled when she echoed my thoughts and placed a kiss on the top of her head. The hand on top of mine squeezed softly, and I answered by sliding up and down, not really meant to arouse but more so just to feel her. The shiver that answered my motions was a plus, but I was happy enough to sit together with nothing more than a light touch between us. It was Cameran who pushed things forward.

I felt her turn and looked down to see her eyes on me. We were too close, and her expression too damn sweet and open for me to do anything but lean down to cover her lips with mine. As content as I was to keep our kisses brief and shallow, the press of teeth against my bottom lip had me

groaning softly. That little noise seemed to set something off in her, and the intensity changed. There was nothing tentative about Cameran's kisses then. Her tongue swept in, demanding attention as it brushed against the roof of my mouth and mapped out the cut of each tooth. I tightened my grip on her thigh, trying to keep myself from being swept away from the force of need that surged in me. I had to keep control and not let things get too far.

That effort was thrown out the window when the hand covering mine lifted, coming down on my own thigh but higher up, close enough to my pussy that I let out an unsteady breath. My breath was swallowed and fed back into my own mouth until I wasn't sure which one of us was breathing the hardest. The slick sound of our lips moving together was pure fucking sex, and I turned on the couch to face her. As if trying to keep me from getting away, Cameran moved with me, her free hand threading through the hairs on the back of my head.

"Fuck," I panted as I finally ripped my lips away to noisily draw in a breath. Her chuckle was deep and low and sent a shiver of need down my spine. That sound helped make my decision. Clearly, Cameran wanted this, and so did I.

What the hell was I trying to hold back for?

I gripped her hips and shifted, pressing my back against the couch and pulling Cameran into my lap. She let out a soft gasp, the sound sinking into my bones. I tightened one hand around the curve of her hip, and the other buried itself into the hair that had fascinated me from the very start.

Her hair was softer than I had imagined, and I curled a thick lock around my finger. Her lips were pressed against my cheek, and each puff of breath skittered over my skin, making me shiver. There was enough heat between us to set the couch on fire, and I groaned when the fingers in my hair pulled, tugging my head back. I swallowed hard, the skin of my neck fully bared, and vaguely, I wondered who was actually in control. The thought flew out of my mind when I felt that first nip of her teeth on the underside of my jaw.

"Fuck," I groaned as I brought my hands down to grip at Cameran's back. Her hips were moving in slow shifts and waves as she perched on top of my thighs.

"Please."

It was that plaintive little moan, so at odds with the writhing succubus on my lap, that had me surging up with the need to give and not

just take. In two quick moves, I had Cameran pinned beneath me on the couch. Her legs parted with no prodding, and I'd swear I could taste the heat rising from between them. I gripped one of her thighs, pulling it tight around my waist before letting my hand follow her body, up her thigh, past those sinful hips that begged to be held tightly and grazed her side.

Cameran looked up at me, her dark eyes gone hot with need. I knew that same look was no doubt mirrored in my own gaze. Her lips parted, and that sinful tongue that had chased away my earlier doubts started along her glistening lower lip as if to find all the lingering flavor of our lips combined. I was helpless to do anything but lean in and meet her mouth again as fire consumed me.

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Chapter Seventeen

Cameran

The heat was almost too much to bear as Julie's body settled more firmly on top of mine. Her weight was equally comforting and arousing. I almost lost my thoughts to wondering how those two feelings could exist in the same space, but then her hand that had been resting against my side, sending bolts of electric pleasure through me, cupped my cheek. I sighed softly, my lips moving almost without conscious thought, dragging against Julie's in a wet caress.

My hands were buried in her hair, gripping tightly at the silky strands as if they would keep me from falling under completely and writhing until completion washed over me. I shifted my hips, enjoying how they were pressed open by hers. The hot puffs of breath against me made me bold, and I loosened one hand, bringing it down to grip one side of Julie's ass. I wished the fabric of her jeans wasn't between us before I realized clothing was optional at this point. With a huff of laughter at my own foolishness, I separated our lips, dragging in a cool gulp of air before I spoke.

"Maybe we should take this to my room."

Julie's gaze was heavy, and if not for how much I wanted this, I would have shied away. The hand against my cheek was now brushing my skin, and I let my eyes slip shut as I relished in that simple touch. When I felt fingers trace the seam of my lips, I opened my eyes again.

"Is that what you want?"

"Do you not want to?"

Julie chuckled softly, and her eyelids fell halfway closed as her gaze shifted lower. “That wasn’t what I asked.”

This was not what I was good at. I could pretend in my head that I was some confident seductress who knew all the right things to say to lure beautiful women into my bed, but the reality was I was running purely on random PornHub scenarios and the fantasies that had cropped up in my thoughts. That Julie hadn’t paused and asked me if I was a virgin was a wonder to me, considering I hardly knew what I was doing. A tap on my cheek brought me back out of my thoughts, and I saw Julie staring at me expectantly.

“We don’t have to do anything you’re uncomfortable with.”

I appreciated her concern, but she was worried about the wrong thing. I wanted this. I wanted this so much it almost left me frozen with the indecision of what to do first and how. Still, the last thing I wanted was for Julie to pull away, so I smiled and pressed my fingertips against her back.

“I’m not uncomfortable at all,” I breathed out, tilting my face up to beckon her closer. “I want this so much I don’t know where to begin.”

Julie’s smile was beatific as she gazed down at me. “Well, how about we begin by you showing me to your bedroom, so we have more space.” She leaned away slightly and ran her thumb down my chin. “I want to spread you out and see what makes you moan.”

I swallowed hard. At this point, anything she did was guaranteed to make me do just that. Even her voice had taken on a breathy quality that made me want to record her so I could listen to it on demand. When she leaned back on her knees, uncovering me and pulling her touch away, I almost whined, but I caught myself and shifted until I could stand. My body was thrumming with so much pleasure already, and I could feel the lips of my pussy already starting to slicken the inside of my panties.

“Follow me.”

“I’d follow you anywhere at this point.”

I felt my cheeks heat more at her words, and when fingers tangled with mine, I couldn’t hide my pleased smile. We were quiet as we moved through the hallway, and I didn’t bother with giving a real tour. There was one thing on my mind, and that was seeing how good Julie looked lying on top of my sheets.

Relief flowed through me when I saw I had cleaned up my room before I left earlier. I didn’t always, and I hadn’t gone on our date today

with the endgame of us being together in my bed, but I sure as hell wasn't about to complain. Julie paused in the doorway, and I turned around, ready to reassure her again that I was one-hundred percent ready to dive under the covers with her, but I didn't get a chance to state my case. As soon as I turned, my lips were captured in a kiss that swung me right back into arousal so painful my gut clenched with it.

Hands settled on my hips and guided me backward until my knees hit what I knew was the bed, and I nearly toppled over. I wrapped my arms around Julie's shoulders as I dropped down on the bed, pulling her with me. The angle wasn't the best, but I wasn't keen on losing any bit of her touch. I expected her to sit down beside me, but instead, I was surprised when she shifted until she was kneeling on the carpet in front of me. Her hands slid down my thighs, parting them once again until she could fit herself between them.

"This okay?"

I giggled softly and nodded. "Are you going to ask me that every time you make a move?"

She smiled. "I might."

"You don't have to."

"Maybe I just like hearing you say that you want me."

I sucked in a desperate breath and pulled her back against me. We traded kisses as our tongues drifted from one of our mouths to the other. The rumble of pleasure that Julie let out had me biting down softly on her lip, and I let out a sound of my own when her grip on my thighs tightened. Her thumbs dug in, pressing against my inner thighs, and I tried to open them even wider, wanting that touch elsewhere. My desire must have been obvious because without asking, her hands moved back up, this time skirting briefly over my cunt before I felt fingers at the button of my jeans.

Each brush of her knuckles on the sensitive skin of my stomach had me tensing with pleasure until I was a ball of need. The zipper was loud over the slick sounds of our kissing, and I let go of Julie's hair to brace against the bed so I could push my hips up. The air was cool against my skin, and I reached out to get Julie in a similar state of undress. I was far less smooth with it, and we both giggled when I jerked her jeans open finally. She pulled away to push her jeans down her legs, and I took the time to scoot up the bed. My mouth fell open when she took initiative and lifted her shirt, pulling it up and over her head. I quickly followed, throwing

my shirt over the bed, not caring where it landed. All I cared about was having her bare skin on top of mine.

My eyes widened when Julie crawled onto the bed and slowly moved back over me. She was sleek and moved with the confidence of someone who looked good naked and knew it. But it was more than that. The clear desire in her eyes as they swept over my body transferred some of that confidence to me, and it was that bit of undisguised enjoyment that had me pausing her with my foot before she could reach me.

"What?" she asked, voice pitched low as she paused. Her hand came up and gripped my ankle, guiding it up before she brushed a kiss over the thin skin that covered that lump of bone. The effects were instantaneous. I had never thought of that as an erogenous zone, but I was clearly going to have to rethink everything I thought I knew about pleasure.

I held onto my newfound confidence and reached behind me. The straps of my bra were annoying, but I was able to unhook them and slowly let the fabric fall down my arms. Julie's eyes widened briefly before again falling halfway shut as her gaze followed my motions. I let my bra fall to my waist before flinging it away. The desire to cover myself was there, but it was nothing compared to the almost physical touch of her gaze.

"Like what you see?"

"You have no fucking idea," Julie said heatedly. She pressed another kiss against my ankle before letting her lips slowly slide up my calf. Each press left goosebumps in its wake, and I gripped the blankets as syrupy pulses of pleasure crashed over me.

Julie's eyes stayed on me as she moved closer, and I couldn't have looked away even if I wanted to. Her arms slid under the back of my thighs, and before I could utter a word, she pulled my thighs, sliding me back down the bed until I could feel her breathe out against my panties.

"Still good?"

"Fuck," I replied, my mind not knowing how else to respond. Her chuckle was low, but before I could try to form another word, she pressed a kiss on my cunt over the fabric covering it. The feeling was unbelievable, and I knew that if it was this good now, I might not survive the night.

I had expected her to keep going, but she surprised me again by continuing up my body, placing sucking kisses on my stomach until she was at my bared breasts. Her hands cupped me, and I groaned. Thumbs flicked over my nipples that had already hardened in the cool air of the room. The

feeling almost tickled until a tongue joined the fray, and then it was all pleasure. My hands gripped Julie's head as I arched my back, pressing more fully into her. There was something about feeling the fabric of her bra on my skin.

"Oh," I breathed out, dropping my head back against the pillow. I looked up at the ceiling as I whined out my pleasure. Julie's mouth pulled off and was replaced by her fingers. The same fingers that had expertly manipulated joysticks at the arcade were now expertly plucking my nipples until everything was pure heat. When her lips wrapped around my other nipple, I squeezed my thighs around her sides and let out a soft gasp.

"The noises you make," she whispered against my skin. I lifted my head and looked down to see her gaze fixed on my face even as her tongue traced my nipple. "I wish I could record you."

I didn't know what to say to that. Some part of me crowed in delight at the thought that Julie wanted to hear my pleasure, and the other part of me—the part that grew smaller with each touch—wanted to hide away at the thought of anyone hearing my sex noises. She didn't wait for me to respond before capturing my lips again, and I threw myself into the kiss.

Her hands left me, and I felt her moving before the unmistakable feeling of her breasts pressing against mine filtered through. Something about the thought of her being bared to me had my confidence surging, and before she could press back against me, I reversed our positions, settling on top of her with my body covering hers.

"Fuck yes, baby."

Julie's hands pressed against my back, and I bent my head, capturing her carob-hued nipple between my greedy lips. I suckled her, enjoying the salted taste of her skin. Her nails gently ran up my back, and I moaned, switching to her other nipple to give it the same amount of love. I had always known I liked women, but now it was really and truly confirmed. The scent of her had me ravenous to taste everything.

I shifted down the bed and didn't hesitate to press my nose against the top of her mound, breathing in her unique scent. Her panties were black and simple, but I only cared about what was underneath. Taking a play from her book, I looked up.

"Can I?"

Julie groaned and propped herself up on her elbows. Her lips were puffy and flushed a deep rose from our kisses. Her cheeks were also

touched with rouge, and if not for how much I wanted to taste her here, I would have come back up and brushed my lips over them to feel their heat.

"Anything you want," she replied, voice barely a whisper.

I smirked and hooked my fingers under the final barrier between us. Pulling it down her long legs gave me a moment to center myself. This was it. It was like I had been preparing for this for so long and now was the final exam.

The scent of her had my mouth watering. She was earthy and warm. Her pussy lips glistened in the weak light with her own juices, and I felt a thrill go through me that she was just as into this as I was. The first taste of her on my tongue confirmed that fuck yes, I was into women. I savored her unique flavor, so different from the few times I had tasted my own. The fingers that brushed against my cheek got captured and pulled into my mouth for a few moments before I dove back in. Julie's thighs bracketed my head as I lost myself between her engorged folds. Her cunt was hotter than anything I had experienced before, and I thrust my tongue inside her, intent on driving her wild.

"Jesus, Cam." Her voice broke on my name as she fell back against the bed. I reached up with one hand to grip one of hers before I threw myself back into tasting her. The pulse of her walls against my tongue was accompanied by a fresh burst of her perfect brand of slick, and I pressed deeper, brushing my nose against her clit. The jerk of her body against me had me tightening my hold on her thigh.

The air between us grew damper, and the rustle of the sheets as Julie writhed against them enflamed my blood even more. One of her thighs fell open onto the bed, and I felt her body start to tremble. My breathing was shallow, matching hers, and I stared up the length of her body when the sounds from her lips grew sharper. Her free hand shot out and gripped the back of my neck.

"Oh shit."

I groaned when I felt her hips press up against me. Her quick gasp of breath was the perfect song, and I didn't take my eyes off Julie as she arched up and came.

Nothing in my life had ever felt like this. Her leg shook against my back, and her hand squeezed mine tightly. I never stopped, the motion of my tongue darting away and then back again between her slick folds. I wanted to imprint her flavor onto my skin, and I didn't move away until I

felt her hands trying to pull me up. I reluctantly lifted my head, enjoying the coolness of the air against my spit-and-juice-slicked face. Julie pulled me then, and I shivered in pleasure when her tongue traced its way across my chin as she chased her taste on my skin.

"Was that okay?" I couldn't keep myself from asking. I was pretty sure she came and wasn't faking it, but that small insecurity still lingered.

Julie pulled back slightly and looked at me like she couldn't believe I had asked. "Was that okay?" she repeated, voice hoarse. "I saw fucking stars, baby."

I smiled and leaned down, covering her lips with mine. I wasn't finished and fully intended on finding my way back between her tanned thighs, but before I could move, I found myself on my back once again, with Julie looking down at me. Her lips slowly curled up in a smirk, and I swallowed hard at the hunger in that gaze.

"My turn."

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Chapter Eighteen

Julie

I sighed and rested my chin in my hand as I stared down at my phone. The smile on my face felt strange, and I wondered what it looked like to someone else. I hadn't felt like this in a long time—hopeful and so excited for whatever the future might entail. Dating had never before been like this, not even when Claire and I had first started our relationship.

Things with Cameran were easy in a way that had me wishing there were more hours in the day to spend with her. Whenever I left her place, the scent of her always lingered and swirled around me, beckoning me back again. Putting her house in my rearview mirror was still hard, even two weeks since our first date. I hadn't stayed the night yet, and she hadn't offered. This thing between us was intense, and while I had given in and fallen into her bed with only a half-hearted protest, I wanted to do this right.

Well…as right as falling into bed with Cameran after only our second official date. But I think we both could be forgiven for that. The lead-up had been pretty intense, and we were both grown-ass adults. The sex since then had been amazing, and what always came after, us talking and getting to know one another, was always amazing as well.

"What is this?" I looked up to see Hailey in my doorway. "Is that a shit-eating grin on your face I see?"

I snorted but made no move to dim the grin that graced my face. This smile was well-deserved, especially after last night had left me starry-eyed as I drove home. Despite seeming so demure in the beginning, Cameran was proving to be more than a handful between the sheets, and I was enjoying the hell out of trying to keep up.

“What’s up?”

Hailey walked in. “Not a thing. Just came to see how things are going with our favorite barista.” She flopped down in the chair across from me. “Sean keeps sending me texts of Cami looking blissed out. It’s kind of adorable.”

That got my attention. “What? What pictures?”

She waved her hand and pulled out her phone. “Don’t get your panties in a twist. I’ll text them to you.”

I narrowed my eyes at her until my phone chimed with a new message. I looked down at it, and immediately, any ire that was building was stamped away. The picture of Cameran was sharp, and I could see the little half-smile on her face that no doubt matched my own. It was the same smile she’d had last night as we kissed goodbye on her doorstep. The same smile that made each step I took heavier as it brought me away from her.

The sound of a picture being taken jolted me back to attention, and I looked up in time to see Hailey smirk.

“What did you—”

“It’s only fair that I send one back to Sean.” She glanced over the phone at me. “We wouldn’t want Cami to think you aren’t as into her as she is into you.”

I rolled my eyes but let it go. I wasn’t ashamed for Cameran to know I was in this for the long haul. We hadn’t expressly discussed where we wanted this relationship to go, but it was still early. There was no need to rush important conversations before we were both ready.

“I was very into her last night, so that shouldn’t be a problem.” Hailey’s fake gagging noise had me chuckling, and she joined in after a moment before we both fell quiet. I looked back down at my phone, tracing the lines of Cameran’s face with my greedy eyes. When the screen changed as a call came in, I almost sent it straight to voicemail just to have her face back on my screen. When I saw it was my mom calling, I held up a finger to Hailey and answered the call.

“Hi, mom. Everything okay?”

“Yes. Your grandparents get in tonight, so we need you home this evening.”

I blinked quickly and straightened up. I had forgotten that my grandparents were coming in today, thanks to the fog of my new relationship, and then I remembered that tonight, I was supposed to see a

movie with Cameran. I sighed softly when I realized I was going to have to cancel that so I could be at my parents' place for the evening.

"Ji-hyun. Did you hear me?"

I winced when she called me by my Korean name. I must have missed part of what she was saying, so I apologized and asked her to repeat it.

"I said pick up your sister from campus on your way to the house. Her car was being funny, so your uncle came and picked it up to get it looked at."

"Oh, okay," I replied. I made a note to myself to give Anna a call before I left so she could be ready when I pulled up in front of her dorm. "Do you need me to pick up anything else?"

Mom hesitated before telling me no. "Ji-hyun…will you come alone? Are you bringing extra friends I need to tell your grandparents about?"

I swallowed hard at her questions. I could hear the same tone in her voice that she had always used when I brought Claire around, and it immediately had me on high alert. Claire had never met either set of my grandparents, even though my dad's parents lived down in Augusta and came to visit every couple of months.

"No. It'll just be me, mom," I replied, fighting hard to keep my voice level and steady. I could see Hailey frown, but I kept my gaze down and didn't acknowledge the disapproval I knew I would see on her face.

"There's no one…" I trailed off, not quite willing to finish my own sentence. "I have a meeting to get to, but I'll make sure to swing by and get Anna." I hung up quickly and looked down at my phone for a few moments as I thought about what to say.

"Julie," Hailey said quietly, breaking our silence. "You have to tell them one day."

"Don't you think I know that?" I replied, anger seeping into my voice. It was the same thing she always said when she overheard similar conversations I had with my parents. "You don't get it. They wouldn't be okay with this; I already know they wouldn't. I just need more time."

"And I understand that. Truly, I do," she insisted. "Maybe you should at least let Cami know that you aren't yet out to them."

I sighed. "I can't do that, Hailey."

"Why the hell not?"

“Most women would run in the opposite direction if I told them that.” As much as people joked about lesbians going after straight girls, being treated as some secret to be hidden at the first sign of light was not going to fly. “It wouldn’t be the first time I got ghosted because I told the person I was seeing I wasn’t out to my family.”

“I don’t think Cami would be like that, though,” she replied. “She seems to really like you.” Her tone was soft, and I looked up. The concern was clear in her face, but it was mixed with something new now. Before, when we had talked about me coming out to my parents, she had always seemed upset at me for not wanting to take that step. Now was different, though, and I wasn’t sure I liked the change.

She seemed sad for me.

“I just want you to be happy—really and truly happy. And I think… no, I know that Cami can make you happy.”

“How could you know that? We’ve only been dating for like two weeks.” I didn’t want to admit it yet, but I felt the same way. The scary part was how it was making me contemplate coming out to my parents and living with the fallout. I didn’t want to keep Cameran my dirty little secret. She deserved more than that. And so did I.

Hailey shrugged. “I don’t know how to explain it, but it just feels different than with anyone you’ve dated before. You even seem different, surer of things.” She stood up. “Look, I’m not saying you need to go out and buy a ring or walk around with a shirt on that says, ‘Vagina Gang for Life.’ I’m just saying to think about it. Really think about it this time.”

I nodded slowly, not able to put my agreement in words but knowing exactly what Hailey was trying to convey. It was getting closer to the time I needed to make some hard decisions. Living in indecision was like a jacket I was quickly outgrowing, and I was chafing at the need to be free of it.

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Chapter Nineteen

Cameran

Floating on cloud nine.

It certainly felt like I was floating a few inches off the ground, and the feeling only grew stronger with each date with Julie. They always ended with her against me and me trying to do my best to not vibrate out of my skin with all the feelings her touch elicited. Even on nights where we were apart, thoughts of how her skin flushed or the phantom sound of her breath in my ear had me unable to settle without at least one orgasm.

This near-constant state of arousal was new for me, but I was quickly becoming addicted. No wonder people called it the honeymoon period. How anyone managed to get things done was a wonder. I was struggling today after a particularly wonderful night, and only Sean's eye-rolling and quips under his breath when there was a lull in customers kept me focused.

"Good lord," he grumbled when I once again paused, replaying a particularly wonderful moment in my mind. A shoulder check had me shaking my head and giving him a rueful smile. He clicked his tongue before pulling a tray out of the small oven we had up front to warm up pastries before serving.

"What?" I asked with faux innocence. I knew exactly what he was grumbling about, but I refused to make this easier for him.

Sean scowled. "Don't 'what' me. You know exactly what." He placed the pastries on a plate and called out the customer's name before putting the plate further down the counter. I smiled and nodded at the man who picked it up and snorted when his eyes lingered on Sean for a moment

longer than necessary. For his part, Sean didn't even seem to notice. I found that strange but didn't say anything about it.

"You have had your damn head in the clouds all morning," Sean said. He folded his arms and looked at me. "Things are going well with Julie then?"

I smiled wide and nodded. "Very well."

He snorted and looked me up and down. "Are you two actually getting to know one another, or are you just fucking?"

"Both," I replied before sticking my tongue out at him. His lips twitched, and I knew he wanted to smile, but he kept up his stern look. I rolled my eyes. "We do talk. We just also happen to be very sexually compatible."

"So, no regrets about finally losing that v-card you'd been carrying around?"

"None." My voice was as firm as I felt. There were no regrets that first night after Julie had to leave, and there were no regrets now. Each subsequent touch from her made my blood sing, and I knew this was something real that I wanted to cultivate. "I really like her, Sean."

"Good." He dropped his arms, and finally, his lips turned up in a pleased smile. "As long as she treats you well and you're happy, then I won't have to go Papa Bear on her."

His phone chimed, and he pulled it out of his apron. I watched his smile grow wider and wondered who was texting him. It was a different smile than the one he normally got when I knew it was my brother texting him.

"What is it?"

Sean looked up briefly before turning his phone screen my way. I took a step closer to peer at it, my eyes widening when I saw it was a picture of Julie. She was sitting at the same desk I had seen in her pictures she periodically sent me during the day, but instead of looking at the camera, she was peering down at the phone in her hands. Her expression looked so open, and her smile was warm and inviting even through the screen. It made me long to reach out and brush her cheek. When I looked away, Sean's gaze was back on me, and his smile was small and fond.

"You two are disgustingly cute, and I hate you."

That startled a giggle out of me, but I shook my head. I knew he was happy to see me happy, and that knowledge carried me through the next few

hours of work.

My phone pinging in my apron finally broke through my focus, and I let out a deep breath and brushed an errant curl back around my ear. Leaving my bangs free had clearly been a bad idea as I had been tucking hair back all day. I paused my restocking and pulled my phone out to check who messaged me. When I saw it was Julie, I unlocked it.

‘Can’t make dinner tonight. I forgot my grandparents were coming to town. I’m sorry. Raincheck?’

I quickly texted her back that it was fine and we could reschedule. She sent a crying emoji, and I laughed and sent one back before composing a new message. Flirting was coming easier to me the longer time went by, and so far, all my teasing words had been met with either more flirtatious responses from Julie or kisses that left my head spinning for days.

‘Come over if you find time to get away and you can make it up to me.’

I followed my words with my own emoji and giggled when Julie sent one back.

“Hey. No more sexting.”

I laughed aloud before putting the phone back in my pocket and getting back to work. It sucked that I might not see Julie tonight, but I looked forward to seeing if she remembered my teasing words the next time we met up. I was thinking about a move we could try when the bell over the entrance rang out again.

“What the fuck is she doing here?”

I jerked my head up at Sean’s words and widened my eyes in disbelief when I saw Claire walking through the door. I hadn’t seen the woman not once since the club when Julie and I decided to stop the charade and get serious. She looked as annoyingly put together as always, and I pasted my customer service smile on my face and hoped I could get through this without losing my cool.

“Hey there. What can I get you?”

Claire eyed me for a moment before smiling. “I’ll have a small Americano with nonfat milk and hazelnut sweetener, please.”

“Right away,” I replied, pitching my voice as sweet as could be. I marked the cup and handed it to Sean, who didn’t bother with the fake smiles. He looked her up and down, every emotion visible on his face before pivoting on his heel and getting started on the drink. I appreciated

his ability to give no fucks about pleasing some people before turning back to Claire and ringing her up.

We were quiet as I finished the transaction, but I knew it wouldn't last. As soon as I handed her the card back and her receipt, I was proven correct when she opened her mouth again to speak.

"Listen. I just want to apologize for being so rude when we first met." I raised an eyebrow at her words. She was apologizing? I knew there had to be a catch. She did not seem like the type of woman who would apologize unprompted without there being an ulterior motive.

"Oh? It's okay."

"No, it's not," she continued. "I think I was just still so upset at the way Julie and I ended things that I wasn't thinking straight. I'm truly happy for you two."

What the hell kind of game is she playing at? I thought to myself, trying to understand her angle. Claire's expression seemed sincere, but something still seemed off.

"Thank you," I replied, trying not to let my unease show. I glanced over and saw Sean watching us closely. I felt comforted knowing he was in my corner in case I needed it.

"So, I guess you two are getting pretty serious? It's been a few weeks since you started dating, right?" That wasn't totally true if you considered when we decided to stop faking it, but I couldn't tell her that, so I nodded. "It'll probably be a while until she gives in and introduces you to her parents. It took years before I finally met them. Don't worry if they don't like you. She's not close enough to them for it to matter."

I narrowed my eyes, not understanding what she was getting at. Julie talked about her parents all the time, and to me, it seemed they were close. Thankfully, Sean saved me from having to say anything back.

"Here's your Americano." His tone was hard and noticeably unwelcoming. I watched Claire's smile dim slightly before she fixed it back and nodded.

"Thank you." She looked back at me. "Good luck."

I frowned but didn't give her the satisfaction of a response. I didn't understand why the hell Claire had come into my café, but I knew I didn't like it.

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Chapter Twenty

Julie

I sighed as I stared down at my phone. Cameran had said that it was okay for us to raincheck our date tonight, but it still made me feel like a shitty person to have to cancel on her. Especially since I would much rather be basking in her smiles rather than playing the part of dutiful daughter. I loved my grandparents, but trying to hide such a big part of me was starting to chafe, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could slip this particular jacket on.

The car door opened, and I put my phone down as Anna slid into the passenger seat.

"About time you got here,"she said while pulling on her seatbelt. "You know how mom gets when we're late."

I rolled my eyes and put the car in gear. "Not my fault. Traffic in Atlanta is unpredictable as hell. You know that."

"Sure, I know that. Mom knows that. Still doesn't change the fact that she's going to give us her patented disappointed stare for being a minute behind her planned schedule."

I didn't reply, but I snorted softly as I pulled back onto the street. Anna was right, of course. I knew mom wouldn't say anything about us being late to family dinner at home, but I wasn't looking forward to her disappointed look. It was the look we got as soon as we walked into the house almost an hour later. I tried to smile through it as I greeted our grandparents and tried to answer questions from family without divulging too much.

“So, Ji-hyun,” my uncle started, drawing the attention of the table. “It seems your career is going well?”

I swallowed my japchae and brushed my lips with my napkin before replying. “Yes. I’m hoping to get a promotion next year if all goes as planned.”

He nodded, eyes never leaving me and making me shift in my seat. I had hoped that his questions would either stay on my job, or he would choose one of my siblings to torture, but it seemed that my night would not go so easily.

“And how will you fit that into marriage and children?”

It was a question I had been getting for years and one I still didn’t have a great answer to. I could feel Anna staring at me, and I knew what she was thinking. *Just tell them. You want kids and marriage, but a husband is nowhere in that picture.* It seemed so easy in my head, but the actuality was much different.

In the end, I decided to keep most of my answer honest but make it vague enough to not arouse suspicion. “I haven’t thought much about that, really. I’m really determined to get a director position in the next five years, which means I have to focus more on my career and less on my social life.”

He nodded as if that was a perfectly reasonable response before turning to one of my cousins, and it was only then that I let out a breath of relief. I looked up and saw my parents glancing at me before they looked at one another, but I tried to appear unaffected. I didn’t know if they didn’t believe me, but I wasn’t going to bring anything up unless they did. Coming out over the dinner table was not how I planned to do this.

Oh, please. You don’t have a plan for that at all.

I tried to ignore that voice inside of me that always called me on my shit and forced myself to tune back into the conversation. Tonight was not the night for coming out, but I knew just how to end the night on a better note. I just had to bide my time and hope that Cameran was still up for me making things up to her. While everyone else’s attention was away from me, I quickly pulled out my phone and held it under the table so I could text without anyone noticing.

‘Come over if you find time to get away and you can make it up to me.’

Her last message was the only good thing I could think of right now, and I quickly typed out a response before anyone else realized what I was

doing.

‘Absolutely. Be there at 10.’

~*~*~

I leaned my head back against the car seat and tried to breathe out all my tension from the night. Dinner had been moderately successful in that I didn’t accidentally out myself from frustration, but the looks my parents kept shooting me had kept me on edge. I didn’t know what that was all about, and once we were effectively dismissed, I hadn’t stuck around to find out.

After dropping Anna off at her dorm, I had immediately reversed course and headed to Cameran’s, where I was now…parked in her driveway, trying not to freak the fuck out. I opened my eyes when I felt the sensation of lights hitting my eyelids. Cameran was standing out on her front porch, and I quickly left the car, stumbling slightly in my haste. When I reached the front door, she took one look at me before hurrying me into her house. I tried to smile, but I knew it was half-hearted at best and looked like a painful grimace at worst.

“Sorry about—”

She silenced me with her lips, and almost immediately, I melted into her embrace. This was what I needed. Her touch was sure as she cupped my face, and I closed my eyes as I absorbed her warmth into myself. I wrapped my arms around her waist and held her close to me as we traded soft kisses back and forth in the hallway. When she moved as if to pull back, I surged forward, not wanting to break our connection. If I couldn’t feel her, then I might remember the mess of the evening. I needed distraction.

I needed her.

I brought a hand up and brushed my fingers across her cheek before sliding around to cup the back of her neck. The way she seemed to collapse into my arms made something powerful swell inside of me, and I fed my tongue between her lips, sweeping in and taking charge. Her groan was subsonic and sent vibrations back between my own lips.

“Too much?” I gasped out before dipping in to brush my lips against hers. I was feeling hungry, and I knew exactly how I wanted to fulfill that hunger, but I had to be sure she was okay with this. I couldn’t let myself get too carried away and make her uncomfortable. It was strange how these two

parts of me circled and warred with one another and yet still wanted the same outcome—Cameran under me as I drove her fucking wild. I needed to get lost in her scent and her taste until everything I consumed carried the markers of her on the back of my tongue.

Cameran's hands clutched at my shoulders in a way that might be painful if not for how much I wanted her. Her lips moved under mine, trying to capture them, but I remained just a hair's length out of reach. I needed to hear her answer before I took things any further.

"Yes."

"Yes, too much?" I loosened my grip.

She pushed herself more fully into my arms and shook her head wildly. "I mean no. Not too much. Not enough."

Fire swept through me, and I gathered her smaller frame into my arms as I kissed her again. We shuffled in the direction of her bedroom, but I kept interrupting our path with the need to feel her between me and the nearest hard surface. It was when I had her sandwiched between me and the doorframe that I heard her let out a soft whine that sent my arousal even higher.

"Fuck," I groaned out. "I need you one-hundred percent more naked and under me."

"Then get to the bed," she panted out before curling a leg around my hip. The long t-shirt she had on was lost as I followed her instructions, and her panties were flung to the floor before she had even landed on her back on the bed.

I stood on the side of the bed and looked down at her. Cameran was a goddamn goddess spread out in front of me like the most expensive buffet, and I planned on taking my time with her. My fingers undid the buttons of my blouse, and I let the material slide onto the floor. I pulled off the tank top I had underneath but left my bra on. I toed my shoes off and shimmied my pants down my legs. My eyes never left Cameran, and I watched as her mouth parted and her breasts rose and fell as her breathing sped up. Clearly, she liked what she was seeing, and I let my smile go wicked before setting a knee between hers on the bed.

Slowly, I crawled over her, not once dropping my gaze. When the top of my thigh met the warmth of her cunt, Cameran gasped. She was already damp with arousal, but I wanted her dripping until her thighs slipped past one another with no friction at all. I rested my other knee on

the outside of her thigh so I could bend myself low. The air was charged with tension as Cameran watched me. She was so good waiting to see what I would do, and I wanted to reward that patience.

I rested our foreheads together briefly and took in a deep breath to keep myself from being too eager. Fingertips brushed against my cheeks, and I smiled at the feeling. Cameran was such a strange blend of innocent sweetness and wanting minx that it kept me on my toes. Even now, her brushes seemed hesitant, but her gaze burned with the same hunger I felt from her cunt below.

“Watch me,” I breathed out finally. I waited for a moment to make sure she heard me before shifting on my hands and moving my lips downward. I skated soft kisses over her cheek, taking pleasure in her answering heat before following the slope of her jaw to the thin skin of her neck. I tasted that warmth with my tongue, enjoying the hint of salt on her skin along with the heady scent of coconut.

My kisses slowed as I savored her sighs. Cameran turned her head, giving me more of her neck to rain kisses down on, and the fingers that tangled in my hair encouraged me. I drew her skin between my lips, nibbling softly. As I moved down, I made sure to pepper kisses over every inch of her until I could lightly scrape my teeth over her collarbone. I balanced on one hand so I could brush my fingers over her skin. When my fingertips skirted over her already hardened nipple, a sound ripped out of Cameran that almost pushed me to abandon my plan. I felt her hands guiding my head to where she wanted me to go, but rather than fight against it, I went with the motion until her dark nipple was presented to my mouth like the sweetest dessert.

“Beautiful,” I whispered before parting my lips and fitting them around her nub. I didn’t suck, instead letting my heated breath wash over her. I watched Cameran’s chest flush darkly before I gave in and wrapped my lips around her.

“Oh, please.” Her voice was soft but strained, and I felt her arch up to meet me. Cameran was everywhere. My senses were totally invaded by everything she was, and I welcomed it. Here, I didn’t have to focus on anything but her pleasure, and I reveled in it.

I switched from one now swollen nipple to the other but shifted my balance so I could roll her engorged tip gently between my fingers. Each flick of my thumb was met with a jerk of Cameran’s body, and I smiled

when a gentle twist was answered by a high moan. The hands that had been in my hair were now scratching grooves over my upper back. When they twisted in the straps of my bra, I frowned, realizing I didn't want anything between us.

When I shifted back onto my knees, Cameran's hands hovered in the air briefly before falling slowly to her sides. Her hands gripped the sheets below her as I undid the clutch of my straps and peeled them down, baring myself to her gaze. I shivered slightly when her eyes drifted lower.

"Take your panties off too." Her voice was firm, and I didn't hesitate to walk the small slip of fabric down my legs as well. Before she could move further, I was back above her, this time spreading her legs with both of mine. I lowered myself until we were touching fully, and I rested on my elbows this time.

"Is this okay?"

Cameran breathed, her chest moving mine as we settled together. "Always."

Her answer made me smile, and I leaned down to join our lips again. Her hands once again found purchase against my back, and when I licked into her mouth, her nails dug in slightly before easing off. That quick loss of control pushed my arousal higher. I reached down between our bodies to push one of her legs out, giving me full access to her. My fingers ran through the tightly curled hair of her cunt before following that line of heat down to her slick lips.

"Oh." Her breath rushed out against me, and I smiled. I leaned down to place more biting kisses against her chin as my fingers rubbed at the folds of her pussy. They were engorged and hot to the touch. My digits slid over them easily, and her legs opened further, granting me even more room to explore. I felt her muscles tense as I carefully slid one finger into her. She was loose around my finger, and I chuckled softly.

"God, baby. You're so fucking wet."

"Sorry," she said quietly.

I shook my head, not wanting her to apologize for something that got me so fucking hot. "Don't apologize. I love knowing I turn you on so fucking much."

I slid my finger out and gently circled it over her clit. The resulting whine Cameran let out had me biting down on my own groan. She was so fucking sweet. I pressed two fingers together and slowly entered her again.

This time, I did groan at the clench of her pussy around me. Her inner walls were so slick, and I knew I needed to get a taste.

"I bet you taste delicious." I didn't want to leave her clutch, but I ignored that and slid my fingers out before bringing them up to my lips. When I saw her eyes on me, I parted my lips and sucked my glistening fingers into my mouth. The hitch in her breath was enough to ruin some of my patience. She was wanting, and I wanted to make her lose it.

"God, I was so right," I said after I let my fingers fall from my lips. "You taste like fucking magic."

"Julie."

I pressed my fingers back into her, and this time, I didn't pause. I thrust my hand forward, brushing my thumb over her clit to push her pleasure higher. Cameran's head fell back, and her nails dug in and stayed there. I stared at her, not wanting to miss a moment of her pleasure. It was intense, and each time I thrust my fingers back into her hot cunt, a gasp of pleasure split her lips until the air was filled with the sensual music of slick movements.

"Look at me." I didn't know what possessed me to say it, but I just knew that I needed her to see me like I saw her. Cameran's eyes immediately opened and locked on mine. Her eyes were wide, and if not for my body pressing hers down, it felt like she would have vibrated off the bed.

The sounds of my fingers entering her wet pussy grew louder as more slick ran between her thighs, and I could feel myself growing wet from my own arousal. I ignored it for now, even as I rubbed my thighs together. I wanted to see Cameran come.

"Come on," I growled out against her ear. I took the lobe between my teeth, sucking hotly before I spoke again. "I want you to fucking drown me in your slick."

Cameran's moans changed pitch, growing higher and needier until she pulled me against her with more strength than before. Her cry was loud and triumphant, and I felt my own sense of victory wash over me as her cunt tightened around my fingers.

We stayed that way, pressed against one another from top to bottom, and I let myself get lost in the feeling of just belonging with her.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Cameran

I frowned as I stared at my phone. Julie hadn't responded to my last text yesterday, and I wasn't sure if I should text again or just wait. What were the rules of engagement here? Should I wait a full twenty-four hours before texting again? Should I wait longer? If it were Sean or Rod who hadn't responded, I wouldn't have hesitated to text them again and maybe rib on them for not replying sooner, but I wasn't sure if Julie and I had that type of relationship yet.

My fingers hovered over her contact info before I scrolled down instead and hit Sean's number. I felt bad interrupting his holiday off, but it was an emergency.

"This better be important. I was about to indulge in a little self-love."

I grimaced. "You didn't have to tell me that."

"Ugh, I meant a bubble bath and a glass of wine. Get your mind out of the gutter."

"Right. Sorry."

"It's fine. I'm just trying to do something to exorcise the memory of last night's disaster date from my mind."

I heard water splash in the background before his words caught my attention. "Wait. What date last night? You didn't tell me you were going out with someone."

"Truly unimportant. Seriously. Let's not talk about it, ever." I almost protested, but he spoke up again before I could even form the words. "What's up? Shouldn't you be out with your new boo?"

I winced when I remembered why I was calling Sean. “Yes. Well, no. She had to cancel our date for today.”

“Again?”

“Yeah,” I replied, trying not to sound as forlorn as I truly was. I bit my bottom lip before continuing. “And she didn’t respond to my text when I mentioned rescheduling. That was yesterday. Should I text again? Would that be too much, too soon? I don’t know how to do this. Am I being too pushy?”

I heard Sean sigh, and I sat down on my couch. Dramatic was not something I enjoyed being, and a part of me was cringing from how I was responding to this. Just because Julie had always been quick to respond to my texts didn’t mean she couldn’t have a slow day. Maybe she really was just too busy to respond.

“I’m being silly, aren’t I? Maybe she just isn’t near her phone. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“Cami, it’s fine. It’s your first relationship. Cut yourself some slack.”

I let out a heavy breath. “Right. You’re totally right. I’m overthinking this.”

“Listen. Let me get dressed, and I’ll pick you up so we can go to brunch. You and Julie have been practically attached at the hip for a month, so it probably just feels strange to not be around her again for a day. It’s fine.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to change your plans just for me.”

“As long as you pay, you can change my plans anytime. I’ll pick you up in twenty.”

~*~*~

“This was just what I needed,” Sean said as he leaned back in his chair. The sun was high in the sky, but thankfully, there was a cool breeze to keep it from being too warm to enjoy. I had to admit I was feeling much better as well, thanks to a heaping plate of French toast and a cup of coffee. Sean eyed me over the rim of his wine glass. “How about you? Feeling better?”

I nodded. “Much. I don’t know what got into me there.”

He shrugged and looked down as he turned his glass in his hand. “First relationships are confusing, and everyone tends to get a little irrational now and then as they figure things out. I’m sure Julie would have forgiven you for being a little overeager if you told her—”

“There is no way I’m telling her about my lack of experience,” I said, cutting him off. “It hasn’t come up anyway, so there’s no need to even go there.”

Sean rolled his eyes. “Whatever you say, girlie.”

I gave him an eye roll of my own before standing. “I need to run to the bathroom. Be right back.”

He waved me away, and I shook my head before making my way around the other tables. The mimosas he had talked me into were quickly making themselves known, and I blinked hard to make sure I was steady on my feet. I cursed my luck when I accidentally bumped into someone.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. Wait. Don’t I know you?”

I paused and looked at the other woman. She was young, probably college-aged, with skin like the warmest sand and espresso-colored eyes. She did look vaguely familiar, and I narrowed my eyes.

“I don’t think so? Maybe you’ve been to my café?”

She clapped and pointed at me. “That’s it. You’re the girl from the pictures.”

“Pictures?”

She reached out and grasped my hands. “It’s awesome to finally meet you. I didn’t think my sister would ever introduce us.”

I blinked quickly, cursing the mimosas that dulled my brain, leaving me unsure how to respond. Clearly, this girl thought I was someone, but other than faintly looking like…

“Wait,” I said, taking a wild guess. “Are you Julie’s sister?”

Her smile was wide as she nodded. “Yeah. I’m—”

“Anna!”

My heart seemed to stop as that familiar voice reached me. I swallowed hard and turned to look behind me, knowing exactly who I would find but still somehow unprepared for it.

Julie’s gaze was on me, and her eyes widened like she saw a ghost. The hand that had clearly been outstretched, maybe to reach for Anna, fell back to her side as she took in the moment. Even with my confusion, I

couldn’t help but notice how good she looked. It had been a few days since I had seen her, and though I hadn’t forgotten, it was still like the first time all over again.

“Julie,” I said, voice breathy with my shock. *Say something.* I opened my mouth to do just that when I caught sight of more people coming up behind her.

“Ji-hyun. What is going on?”

An older woman stepped from behind her, and immediately, I could see the resemblance. They had the same build, though Julie was a few inches taller with skin a few shades darker. The woman’s lips were thinner, and the lines of her face slightly more pronounced, but they had the same dark brown eyes that seemed to notice everything. Right now, those brown eyes were also on me.

“Ji-Soo? Ji-hyun? Who is this?”

I felt Anna step up beside me, but my eyes were on Julie, who still seemed frozen in place. Her mouth was partially open, but no sound was coming out. *What do you want me to do?* I asked in my mind, wishing that telepathy was something I possessed if only to understand what was happening. *Say something.*

My pleading went unanswered until Anna spoke up.

“This is Julie’s—”

“A barista.” I jerked when Julie’s words burst forth, and it was enough to apparently startle Anna into trailing off as well. Julie turned to the other woman. “She’s the barista from the café I go to a lot.”

It was like the floor had dropped out from under me. There was no air for me to draw in, and if I were moving, I would have stumbled over my shock. The other woman looked from Julie to me and back to Julie again.

“The barista?”

“But she—” Anna tried speaking up again, only to be once again interrupted. This time, Julie stared at her as she spoke.

“Yes. She…we’ve become friends.” She glanced at me for a moment before looking away. “It’s good to see you.”

“I’m not just…” My words got choked up, and I didn’t know what else to say. I could feel my eyes starting to burn, my body starting to tingle the way it did when I knew I was about to faint. *I have to get out of here.* “I own my café,” I gasped out finally before turning and hurrying back the other way.

Spots darted in front of my eyes, and I gasped for breath. I pushed around a waitress and jolted when I hit the table. I could see Sean's face swimming in front of me, and though his mouth was moving, I couldn't hear anything. When he stood and cupped my face, I clung to his shirt and tried to push out my words.

"Home." I could feel coolness on my cheeks, and I knew then my tears had begun to fall. I closed my eyes and forced in a stuttered breath. "Take me home. Please."

I felt us move, and I didn't open my eyes even as I felt him bundle me into the car. The darkness was the only thing keeping me from falling apart with something that seemed a lot like heartbreak.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Julie

Fuck.

That was all I could think as I watched Cameran hurry away. My body jerked with the need to follow after her and say something, anything other than what I had just said. The presence of my mother and the knowledge that the rest of my family was no doubt staring at us from behind her left me petrified and frozen with indecision.

"What's going on?"

It was my grandmother's voice that had me moving again, but not toward her. I took a step toward the direction Cameran had gone. The look on her face when I had said she was just a barista I knew had my heart seizing with regret. I hadn't meant it like it sounded, but once the denials came out, I wasn't able to stop them until the damage was done. I looked over and saw Anna staring at me with sadness and disappointment in her eyes.

Coward, her gaze said. *You're nothing but a fucking coward.*

She was right. I was a coward. I was terrified of doing the one thing that would make a relationship with Cameran fully possible.

But I don't want to lose my family.

That was the truth of it. Because as much as I wanted to be free to be my entire self, I knew that doing so would cause me to lose my family. I didn't know how to make both things work. I didn't know if I could have both.

I didn't know which I could live without.

“Do you need to go after your friend?” my mother asked softly. I swallowed hard as I thought about my answer.

“No.” *Yes.* “I’ll see her tomorrow when I stop by before work.” I saw Anna frown and mentally pleaded with her to let it go. I couldn’t do this right now. It took everything in me to turn back to my family.

“We should go sit down.” My voice trembled even with me trying to make everything seem normal. I felt anything but. It was hard to get a breath in, and I thought I might faint. *Darkness might not be so bad*, I thought to myself. Anything but this heartache and grief.

My mom gave me one last glance before turning and following our other family members to the table we had reserved. Anna grabbed my arm before I could follow, and I let her hold me back.

“What?”

“You know what,” she said softly. There was anger in her voice but pity too. It was that pity that pushed my mood even lower.

“I can’t do this right now, Anna.”

She nodded as if she understood, and I thought I might get away without another blow to my heart until she spoke again. “But you better make a choice before your indecision makes you lose your future.”

I clenched my jaw, fighting back the panic and fear her words brought. “I can’t choose, Anna. I can’t choose between love and my family.”

My voice broke in the end, and I couldn’t even find it in me to be embarrassed because that was the truth of it. I knew I could fall for Cameran. I was halfway there before we had even really talked, and with each passing day that I got to know who she was beyond the fantasy I had built up in my mind, I became surer that she might be the one person I had dreamed about since I was a girl and realized that I liked girls too.

“I don’t want to lose either.”

“And maybe you don’t have to.” At my frown, Anna shook her head. “Talk to her. Tell her your fears.”

“I can’t.”

“Then you’ve lost before you even started.” She didn’t wait for me to say anything else before walking away, leaving me alone with only my fears and my broken heart.

~*~*~

“We need to fucking talk.”

I wasn’t surprised when I opened the door of my condo to see Hailey standing on the other side. I figured, after the mess that was my family brunch, Anna would probably have already divulged the whole shitshow to Hailey via text. I hadn’t been paying close attention to the conversation that had been flowing, but I had seen Anna texting furiously at one point.

“Of course, we do,” I replied with a heavy sigh. I stepped back to let her in and prepared myself to once again be knocked into an emotional tailspin. “Did Anna send you?”

“You know she did,” Hailey confirmed. She dropped her purse on the bar and walked over to the wine fridge. “Don’t talk yet. We need alcohol and a game plan for how to salvage this shit.”

I didn’t argue. The only reason I hadn’t gotten any wine into my system yet was because I’d been stopped dead in my tracks by the pictures Cameran and I had taken from our first date at the arcade. The smiles on our faces had hit me hard in the chest, and all I had done was sink down on the couch as I stared at not just her but me. Seeing myself smiling so carefree had done a number on me, and I wasn’t too proud to say that Hailey’s knocking might have been the only thing to keep me from sobbing in that moment. As it was, my eyes were still burning slightly with the memory of unshed tears.

“I don’t think there’s a way to do that.”

Hailey pulled out a bottle before glancing at me. “Don’t be such a fucking downer.”

“I’m not,” I protested. “I’m being realistic about this. You didn’t see Cameran’s face, Hailey. I said she was just a fucking barista I knew.”

I fell down onto my couch and put my face in my hands as if I could cover up my shame from being a fucking dumbass. I heard Hailey opening and closing the cabinets and drawers but didn’t uncover my face. I knew my cheeks were red, and in a moment, they would be streaked with the tears that were no longer a threat but a reality.

The couch dipped down beside me before I heard Hailey speak. “Okay. You messed up—”

“Fucked up,” I interrupted finally, moving my hands from my face. Hailey was holding out a full glass of wine to me, and I took it before

swallowing a healthy gulp of it without hesitation. “I truly fucked up this time. This was worse than Claire.”

“Nothing could be worse than Claire,” she countered. “Claire knew the situation with your family and used that to hurt you. Nothing Cameran has ever done makes me believe she would ever do that to you.”

“I know,” I conceded easily. I knew Cameran was nothing like Claire, but I was still terrified.

“So why the hell haven’t you told Cameran about your family not being accepting of you being a lesbian?” Hailey’s frustration was clear, and I understood it.

“I was going to.” At her disbelieving expression, I jumped up, not caring about spilled wine as some of it sloshed over the glass. “I was. I just wanted her to fall for me enough that it wouldn’t matter to her. You don’t know what it’s like out here, Hailey. Not being out is like some mortal fucking sin, and most women won’t even look at you twice if you haven’t officially come out to everyone you’ve ever fucking known.”

“And I get that, Julie, I really do.” She reached up and wrapped her hand around my wrist, gently guiding me back down onto the couch. “But what I don’t understand is why you think Cameran is anything like that.”

“I don’t,” I replied. “Not really anyway. I just… I like her so goddamn much, and I don’t want to lose her.”

Hailey squeezed my wrist gently. “You will if you don’t talk to her. And apologize…profusely. Seriously, you better fucking beg her for another chance because if what you did is exactly how Anna described, you done fucked up bad.”

I nodded and took another large sip of wine. “It was probably worse than Anna described. I think I might have blacked out for a moment, and when I came to, Cameran looked like…” I trailed off as my voice choked up. I kept seeing Cameran’s distraught expression every time I thought back to that moment in the restaurant, but I couldn’t put it into words. I never wanted to see that expression on her face ever again, especially not because of something I said or did.

Or didn’t do. Hailey is right. I should have talked to Cameran from the start.

“I have to go see her.”

“You’re damn right you do. Go now. Me and your wine will make ourselves comfortable on the couch.”

I put my glass on the table and jumped up from the couch. My thoughts were swirling in my mind, but I didn't let myself stop to think. I didn't want to talk myself out of coming clean this time.

Pulling into Cameran's driveway had my heart beating wildly. I took a deep breath before leaving my car and walking up to her front door. I rang the bell and waited with my hands behind me back. The seconds stretched out with no response, and I reached out to ring the bell again.

My mood soured further when there was still no response, and I pulled out my phone to call Cameran's number.

'You've reached the voicemail of Cameran Davis. I can't come to the phone right now, but please leave a message, and I'll get back to you as soon as possible.'

I frowned before deciding to leave a message. "Hi, Cameran. It's Julie. Could you give me a call when you get this? I want to talk to you… apologize. I want to apologize for—" I stopped abruptly when the time ran out, and I cursed loudly before switching to text.

I was sure Cameran was probably pissed at me and didn't want to hear my voice, but I hoped she would call me back. With a sigh of defeat, I turned and walked back to my car. Surely, I would be able to apologize in person like I needed to when I stopped by the café tomorrow.

My surety only lasted until I walked into *Love & Lattes* and saw Sean behind the counter with two other people I didn't recognize. His eyes narrowed slightly when they landed on me, but otherwise, his expression didn't change. I gave him a small apologetic smile as I walked up to the counter.

"Hey, Sean. Is Cam around? I want—"

"*Cameran*," he said, stressing her name, "is not here."

I bit my lip at his cold tone. I knew I deserved that for what he had no doubt heard about yesterday. "Right. Is she coming in later?"

"No."

I waited for him to say something else, but he stayed quiet and just watched me. There was a cough from behind me, and I remembered that it was the morning rush, and I was probably holding things up. Suddenly, I wasn't in the mood for coffee or anything really. I had never known Cameran to take a day off from the café, so the fact that she wasn't in today was an even bigger clue that I had really and truly fucked up.

“Well…” I trailed off, not knowing exactly what to say. “I’ll come by tomorrow.”

“Sure.” His gaze slid away from me. “Next customer.”

His words fell like stones as I was effectively dismissed. I left the line and turned back to the front door, ignoring the few stares that followed me, but vowed to come back the next day. When I did, it was the same experience.

Sean would look at me like I was something unpleasant, and I didn’t blame him in the least. Each time I asked where Cameran might be, and each time I was told she wasn’t in for the day. It took a couple days for me to realize that I was being avoided. On the third day, I had even taken an extended lunch to see if Cameran was coming in later than usual, but I didn’t catch sight of her even once. Hailey was no help. If she knew where Cameran was, she was as tight-lipped as Sean.

By the time the weekend rolled around again, I knew it was over. I had lost Cameran before I even truly had her.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Cameran

The house was quiet when I let myself in. A week away had done me some good as far as catching up on sleep, but I was no closer to knowing what I wanted to do when it came to Julie and the relationship we had been forging over the past few months. The sting of her words had lessened somewhat with time and distance, but they were still out there, circling like vultures waiting for the first sign of weakness. A knock at the front door startled me, and I dropped my bag, wincing at the sound of it thudding on the wooden floor.

I opened the door, frowning when I saw Sean standing on the front stoop. “How did—” I cut myself off with a shake of my head. “Never mind. Come on in.”

Sean walked past me, and I closed the door slowly as I took a deep breath. I had, of course, kept in touch with him while I was gone, but I had hoped to have a day or so to get settled before all hell broke loose.

“Don’t worry,” he said, not giving me a chance to speak. “I’m not going to ask you to talk about the elephant in the room.”

I turned and leaned against the door. “Good.”

“But I do feel the need to inform you that she stopped by the café every day you were gone.”

“Sean.”

“And she skulked around outside like I wouldn’t see her through the café’s big ass windows.” He shook his head, looking more amused than anything. “It would be cute if it wasn’t so fucking annoying. You must have

that good-good to have her waiting on you like that. Maybe I need to ask you for pointers."

His words forced a huff of laughter from me even as my heart jumped. I had known that Julie came by the first day I was gone to ask about me. Sean had texted Rod that little tidbit, and Rod had told me. My cell had stayed off the moment I had made my decision to take a spontaneous vacation, and my reaction in the restaurant had been enough for Sean to declare he could handle the café on his own for a week. I never doubted he could, but it had been a big comfort as I packed quickly and found the soonest flight to Washington.

Rod hadn't made me talk at all the first couple days, instead plying me with trips to restaurants and refusing to let me take care of anything. He had even dealt with our parents when they called for our weekly chat, letting them know I was taking some time off to decompress after working nonstop for the past three years.

"Rod wished you had come with me," I said, avoiding the subject.

Sean's smile was small, but I could tell that bit of information made him very happy. "Well, of course, he did. Also, don't think I didn't notice you changing the subject."

My sigh was heavy with the knowledge that I would have to talk about Julie eventually. Sean knew what had occurred in the restaurant, and I knew he had wanted to rip her a new asshole, but he held back for me.

"What do you need me to do?"

The question was appreciated, and I shrugged. "I honestly don't know." I pushed off the door and walked over to the couch, falling down onto it with another sigh. "I just wish I knew what changed."

"What do you mean?"

I frowned as I thought back to last week. "I mean, everything was fine. We were seeing each other and spending time together."

"Did something happen between you guys? Or something with her ex?"

"I mean…her ex did mention something about Julie not being close to her parents, which was strange since Julie talks about her parents all the time." I racked my brain as I thought back to the conversation. "She mentioned not meeting them or meeting them and not worrying if they liked me before wishing me good luck."

Sean nodded. “I heard her say good luck, but I wasn’t sure about what.” He pursed his lips. “Julie’s parents do know about you, right?”

“I don’t know.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Do they know—”

A second knock on the door cut off his words, and we both looked back at it. I knew it couldn’t be my parents, and Rod promised he wouldn’t follow me back home, so I wasn’t sure who could be at the door.

Unless…

I blinked quickly and looked at Sean. “Did you tell Hailey I was coming back today?”

“No. I kept it mum with her, in case she told Julie.” He stood up from the couch and put a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll get it. You sit tight.”

I watched him walk over to the front door and open it. Somehow, I was surprised and yet not to see Julie standing there. I was frozen in place as her eyes widened when Sean opened the door before they slid past him and landed on me. I could see everything in that gaze, and the range of emotions flitting past left me frozen with indecision.

“What are you doing here?”

Julie replied to Sean, but her eyes never left mine. “I was hoping to talk to Cameran. I wanted to apologize and ask, no, beg her to forgive me and just hear me out.”

Sean shifted over, breaking the connection between Julie and my gaze. He looked over his shoulder at me, and I appreciated the moment to breathe and think. I hadn’t planned on talking to Julie so soon, and I wasn’t sure if I was ready. I was already out of my element when it came to relationships in the first place. What if I said the wrong thing?

What if I said the right thing? What was the right thing to say?

“Cami?” Sean’s soft question pulled me back out of my head, and I looked up at him. His expression was blank as he waited for me to decide. “It’s up to you. Whatever you decide, I got you.”

His acceptance and support strengthened me the same way it always did. I knew he would back me up with anything I decided, even if it meant physically throwing Julie off my front porch. But I didn’t want that. I had to understand what went wrong, even if there was no way to fix it.

“It’s okay,” I replied finally. “She can come in.”

He nodded before looking back at Julie. I could hear him mumble something before Julie nodded, but I couldn’t make out what was said. He

moved away to let her in before closing the door.

"I'll be in the guest room if you need me," Sean said before cutting his eyes at Julie and giving her a look. "And just so you know, I am the type of person to spit in someone's coffee."

I pressed my lips together to keep from chuckling, but all Julie did was nod as if accepting Sean's threat. And it was a threat. I didn't doubt if he got mad enough, he might be an ass to her, though I doubt he would do anything involving our café. *Love & Lattes'* reputation meant everything to him despite how he joked about it, and he would never do anything to mess with that.

I shifted over on the couch when Julie walked over, and I tried not to think about the amount of space between us when she sat down. We hadn't been this far apart since we started dating, and it felt horribly wrong. Sean's footsteps faded away as she and I sat there in silence. I didn't know how to start this conversation. Should I even be the one to speak first? I hadn't been the one to mess this up. For the first time, I felt something other than pain and sadness.

I was furious.

Things had been going so well. Okay, of course, how we started was kind of ridiculous, but once we got past that, things had been cruising along wonderfully. I knew relationships weren't without their ups and downs, but this seemed to be too much for only the second real month of dating.

"Why?"

The word broke free from my lips before I had made a conscious decision to say it. Julie seemed to be expecting it because all she did was take a deep breath. The silence stretched a moment longer, and I wondered if she was even going to answer.

"I'm not out."

I blinked slowly, trying to understand what that had to do with my question. "Okay."

It seemed that as much as she was expecting my question, she hadn't been expecting my response. Her eyes widened, and her mouth opened and closed as if she were reaching for words. I waited, wanting to know what she was getting at.

"Okay?" she parroted. "Just, okay?"

"What do you want me to say?" I asked, my confusion making my anger burn hotter.

“I expected…” She trailed off, breaking my gaze as she looked down at her hands. “Most…my family doesn’t know I’m a lesbian. I’m not out to them yet.”

I sighed, my frustration rising. “That’s fine. What I want to know is why you—” I stopped abruptly when her words finally penetrated my brain. I sank back against the cushions. “Oh.”

Julie looked up at me. “Yeah. It’s part of why Claire and I broke up and why nothing ever really worked out for me…before you.”

I wasn’t that naïve. I knew that some women didn’t want to date other women who weren’t completely out to friends and family, but I wasn’t one of them.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“Because I really fucking liked you,” she replied, leaning forward. “I was attracted to you when I first walked into the café and saw you with your pink hair and wide smile. And then, when I got to know you, you were even better than I had imagined.”

“I didn’t think you noticed me at all,” I admitted, wincing at how insecure I sounded. “You barely talked to me.”

“How could I not have noticed you? You’re beautiful.” I felt my cheeks heat at her words even as my ire melted away. “You had me freaking out trying to think of the right thing to say, and I’d never felt that way before.”

I tried not to let my heart get its hopes up. “But in front of your mom and sister…you said I was just a barista you knew.”

Julie winced. “I panicked. Anna knows about you, and she’s great, but my mom doesn’t know about me, and I just…panicked.” She closed her eyes briefly before opening them again. “You are amazing, and I am a fucking fool for not thinking of a better way to introduce you.”

I looked down, not knowing what to say. Julie reached out her hands, pausing briefly before they finished their motion and covered mine.

“I should have said you were my friend at the very least, and I should have told you I wasn’t out, so you were free to decide if you were okay with that.” I looked up, and Julie’s eyes were wet with unshed tears. “I’m so sorry, Cameran. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you, and I would take it all back if I could.”

I peered down at our hands as my mind raced. Understanding fought with residual anger as I thought about my choices. I truly didn’t care that

Julie wasn't out, but I had to know how this would work. I didn't want her to do anything she wasn't ready for, but I also didn't want to be hurt again.

"I don't care about you coming out," I said finally. I turned my hands over and gripped hers. "I'm out, and so is Rod, and our parents are happy for us, but I know not everyone is like that. I know it can be hard, and when you decide you are ready, I will be there for you one hundred percent."

Her expression looked so hopeful then and I wanted to leave it at that, but I knew I couldn't. Julie had really hurt me, and I had spent the past week beating myself up trying to figure out where I went wrong. I didn't want to do that again. There had to be a compromise.

"But if you have to hurt me like that again to maintain your secret, I can't be with you."

I let my pain show in my expression as I looked back up at her. Her eyes widened, and her fingers gripped mine tightly.

"I won't."

"I might not have been in a relationship before, but I know there have to be compromises."

"Wait. What?" I froze as I realized what I had said. Julie looked surprised at my admission. "You've never… This is your first…"

Well, might as well throw it all out there.

"You were my first in a lot of ways," I said carefully, trying to gauge her reaction. "Or are my first, I guess I should say since I don't want—" I cut my words off when Julie leaned forward. I was expecting her lips on mine, but what I got instead was her forehead resting on my own as she closed her eyes.

The closeness called to me the way it always did, but now it seemed even more. The time apart had left me thirsty for her touch and her scent, and now that it was all around me, it was all I could do to not launch myself at her.

"I will never deny you again." Her voice was firm in a way that sent shivers through my frame.

"Julie."

"I might be your first," she replied, eyes opening and finding mine in an instant. "But you are my last."

Her words had me swallowing back tears. They were heavy, but they felt so right. I knew Sean would probably yell at me or tell me I'm

reckless for not fighting harder, but I didn't want to. I wanted this.

I wanted Julie.

With a deep breath in, I loosened my grip before reaching up to cup her cheeks. "We'll figure out how to do this. Together."

My words were just as firm, and I felt no doubt at my decision. I was choosing Julie and everything that would come with it.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Cameran

One year later

I frowned when I opened the front door and saw spots of something on the floor. A quick flick of the light had me pausing once I realized what they were.

Rose petals, dark red and velvety, littered the floor from the doorway and around the corner toward the hallway. I slowly closed the door behind me as a smile bloomed on my face. This was unexpected. I thought carefully to make sure I wasn't forgetting some special date.

"Julie?"

"In the bedroom," she replied from deeper in the house. I carefully made my way down the hallway, trying not to step on and crush my flower path, but the small surprise at the door hadn't prepared me for what I met with in the bedroom.

The room was lit with the soft glow of candles spread across different surfaces. The rose path stopped at the doorway, but the best surprise of all was the woman sitting on the bed, looking up at me with a warm smile.

"What is all this?" I asked. My voice was breathy as I made my way toward the bed.

"Wait," she said before standing up. I paused my steps as she walked over to me. My breathing sped up the way it always did when I saw her coming near. It had been more than a year since our first time, and yet I still found my body singing when in her presence. She reached out, grabbing my hands, and pulled me toward the adjacent bathroom.

Here, too, the space was lit with candles, and I gasped when I saw the tub encircled in more petals and filled with bubbles.

"You drew me a bath?"

Julie's smile didn't wane. "I drew you a bath."

I looked around in disbelief. Even after a year of being together, I was still trying to get used to the sweet ways she chose to show me that she cared. It was endearing how much she tried to make up for the start of our relationship, and even Sean sometimes remarked about it, though he still spent plenty of time giving her the side-eye.

Julie moved behind me and put her hands on my shoulders. "Go on and get in."

I looked over my shoulder and placed my hands over hers. "I will as long as you will too." I quirked my lips up. "Bathing is boring alone."

"Oh?"

I turned my body to face her. "Yes." I lowered my eyelids and reached up, tugging her shirt. "Unless you plan on leaving me alone here while I'm all wet and naked."

"Well, we can't have that now."

Her blouse unbuttoned easily, falling to her sides and giving me a tantalizing view of her suntanned skin. I took a step back and started on my own clothes. My eyes never left Julie's frame as she pulled her shirt off, letting it fall to the floor. I pushed my jeans down, hopping slightly to get them over my feet. When I freed myself from my t-shirt, I saw Julie standing in front of me, gloriously free of any clothing.

My eyes traveled up her frame, starting at long legs that I knew were strong enough to hold me up and over the dip of her hips. Her stomach was toned, thanks to the runs she and Sean occasionally enjoyed together, and her breasts were small but firm, and my hands twitched with the knowledge of just how well they fit in my palms. But best of all was her smile. It was small but undeniably fond as she gazed at me, and I knew without a doubt that the love I saw there was the same that shone from my eyes whenever I looked at her.

"Well," she said, gesturing to me. "Are you going to get naked or what?"

"Right." I quickly peeled off my remaining undergarments and let them drop to the floor. Julie walked toward me, and my mouth went dry. The candlelight warmed her skin to a decadent sun-kissed glow. Her dark

eyes were aflame as she reached for me, her hand cupping my elbow and drawing me to her.

I knew she had intended for me to relax in the bath as I liked to sometimes do after a long day of work, but right now, all I could think about was getting closer to her until I lost all sense of self. She seemed to know exactly what I was thinking, but she shook her head and guided me to the tub.

“You are insatiable.”

Hearing that wasn’t new. Sex or, more specifically, sex with Julie was often on my mind, especially when she was around and there was no one to stop us. Sean had quickly learned not to stop by without calling after the first few times he had walked in on us indulging in some alone time. Now, I let myself be guided into the tub, sighing at the warmth of the water as my limbs were submerged.

Lavender and vanilla floated through the air, and I closed my eyes as the heat flowed over and through me. Giving Julie a key was proving to be a much better idea than I could have ever imagined. If this was what life living with your partner was like, I knew I would soon be craving this every day. Hailey always joked that we were already an old married couple by some standards. I wasn’t sure how much sex old married couples were having, but I was more than willing to keep things up well into old age.

The water rippled around me, and I felt Julie’s arms and legs slide around me until I was once again wrapped in her embrace. While we had showered together many times before, this was new. Baths weren’t common for me, but I found this more than a little enjoyable. The warmth of the water was nothing compared to the heat of Julie behind me. I shivered at the feeling of her arms closing around my shoulders and her nipples pressing into my back. I shifted my hips, moving back against her and enjoying the hitch of her breath. This may not have been what she was originally going for, but I was happy to let things continue in a more intimate vein.

Julie’s hands caressed the skin of my arms, and I felt her breathe out against the back of my neck. “I love your skin.” My eyes fluttered closed as lips brushed against my shoulder. “It’s like you absorb light into you. I swear, sometimes I look at you, and your skin almost glows.”

I giggled and leaned more fully into her arms. Turning my head brought our lips closer, and I took full advantage immediately, taking her lips in a heated kiss. Words weren’t needed as our tongues danced from one

mouth to the other. Julie's hands shifted under my arms until they cupped my breasts. Her thumbs rested against my own nipples that hardened slowly under her touch. I reached down into the water and gripped her thighs. My breath sped up, and everything melted away except the feelings her fingers brought out.

"Just like that," Julie whispered against my lips. "I love the noises you make when I touch you."

I moaned and arched into her touch as she gently rolled my nipples between her thumbs and index fingers. Talking was difficult when I was being bombarded with feelings of comfort and sharp arousal at the same time.

"I prefer yours," I said finally as I lightly scratched my nails against her thighs. I felt her shiver and smiled in triumph. "Let me turn so I can touch you."

Julie shook her head and leaned down to place a sucking kiss against my neck. "This is for you. To make up for our first time."

"What was wrong with our first time?"

"Nothing," she quickly reassured me. "But if I had known it was your first, I would have made it more special."

Warmth filled me as I leaned my head back on her shoulder. This gave Julie's lips more room to roam, and I let myself enjoy the attention. She didn't need to try to make up for our first time together. It already held a special place in my mind, and I thought back to that night fondly, but I couldn't deny that I was enjoying this. Still, I felt the need to reassure her.

"It was special because it was you."

Julie breathed out loudly before leaning her forehead against my neck. "God, baby. How are you so perfect?"

I pressed a kiss to the side of her head. "I'm not."

"Fine," she replied. "Just perfect for me."

Smiling, I shifted until our lips met again. Something felt different about this time. Maybe it was the knowledge that Julie wanted to make this time special. Maybe it was because it was the first bath we were taking together. Regardless of the reason, I was swept away by how sharp my arousal was already. I rubbed my thighs together, causing water to splash up the sides of the tub. With a huff of laughter, I broke our kiss.

"Maybe we shouldn't do this in the tub." When water splashed down onto the floor, Julie chuckled softly and nodded.

“You’re probably right. Stay put.”

I frowned slightly when she got out before realizing what she was doing. She walked back to the tub with a robe held open for me. I stood up and let her wrap me up in it. It was soft against my damp skin, and I curled it around me as I followed her back to the bedroom.

When we reached the bed, Julie turned and took me back in her arms. I let the robe fall open and let her guide me back against the bed. The fabric fell around me, and I slipped my arms out of it, not feeling the slightest need to cover up. The air was warm enough between us to keep me from feeling the chill in the room. The remaining water drops between us kept us slick enough to slide, and I enjoyed rubbing my legs against Julie’s. One of her thighs pressed up between my own, and I groaned when a pulse of arousal swept through me.

Julie’s hands were everywhere, as were my own, and I pressed my own thigh up between hers, enjoying the slick heat that met it. Our kisses grew heavy with each pant of breath we shared, and I felt a whine build up in my chest. I cupped Julie’s face as I lurched toward what I knew would only be my first orgasm of the night. I closed my eyes so tightly lights flashed behind my lids. My hands gripped at her, and I squeezed my legs around hers to keep her thigh against me as my pussy tightened and released. My body twitched, and Julie held me, kisses never pausing. Slowly, my brain came back online, and I felt a hunger that I was becoming well-acquainted with. My desire to make her come.

I slid one hand down between our bodies, brushing against the sensitive skin of Julie’s breasts and enjoying the peaks of her hard nipples before continuing down. I shifted us over, so we were side-by-side on the bed, and I could brush my fingers through the wiry hairs that framed her cunt. Everything was damp; whether from the bath or our own arousal, I didn’t care. What I did care about was feeling the moist heat of her as I slid my fingers between her pussy lips.

Julie’s groan was the most riveting song, and I kissed her with renewed vigor as I pleasured her. I knew now how much she enjoyed the quick press of two fingers into her cunt whereas I might have held back before. I ignored her clit for now, instead using my other fingers to dance up and down her lips. Her free leg slid up my hip, giving me more range, and I used my other hand to thread my fingers through her hair and angle her head back. I wasn’t the only one who made noises when being

bombarded with pleasure. Each moan and sigh that fell from Julie's lips pushed me to want to give her more. I nibbled the skin of her neck, enjoying the flush that spread down and across her upper shoulders.

"Fuck," she groaned, her thigh moving further up on my hip. "Another."

I smirked. "Well, aren't you greedy?"

Julie trembled. "For you? Fuck, yes, I am."

Denying her wasn't something I had any desire to do. I pulled my fingers out of her sopping wet pussy before pressing three together and thrusting them back in. Her slick walls opened with no effort, and I felt a shiver of pride go through me at knowing just how aroused she was. I wanted nothing more than to slide down and taste her on my tongue, but the telltale sign of her cunt tightening slightly let me know she was close to coming. One orgasm would never be enough, but I was patient.

I could wait until after we caught our breath before getting my second fill.

"I love to feel you come." My words were soft and whispered against her shoulder, but I knew by the soft groan that she heard them all the same. Hands gripped my back, and I let myself be pulled against her as air rushed out past my ear.

"I love you."

The feeling that rushed through me was indescribable. Those three words had been on my mind for months, and yet I had never uttered them once. I knew the stereotype about lesbians falling quickly, and as much as I hated it, it was true here. I think I knew from the first moment I laid eyes on Julie that she could be the one to steal my heart.

"I love you too. So much."

There was no hesitation in my words. The dam had been broken, and all my feelings were rushing out in a massive wave that threatened to pull me under. Julie's lips found mine then, and I could taste the love we shared in her kiss. I curled my legs around hers as our breathing evened out. Our skin was still damp from the bath and our lovemaking, but I didn't mind. Being in her arms more than made up for any slight discomfort.

Our words were slow to come as our kisses slowed. I reluctantly slid my fingers from between her damp thighs, smiling when she let out a huff of breath. I was still feeling a bit mischievous, so once I knew I had her attention, I lifted my hand and slid my slick fingers in my mouth, letting out

a slightly exaggerated moan at the taste. Julie's eyes darkened as she watched me, and her fingernails briefly dug into my back.

"You know, I never would have known you were a virgin if you hadn't told me."

I giggled as I let my fingers fall from my lips. "I did a lot of research over the years."

She turned toward me, smile morphing into a knowing smirk. "Research, huh?"

I smirked back. It had taken months, but I was finally comfortable enough to tease back without feeling self-conscious. Julie had never done anything but encourage it.

"Lots and lots of research."

"So, you must have a lot of ideas in that brain of yours."

"You have no idea."

Julie chuckled before leaning down and brushing her lips over mine the way she had done so many times before.

"Why don't you show me what else you've learned?"

Before she could say anything else, I made my move, straddling her easily with no resistance. I wrapped my hands around her wrists and moved them above her head. Her eyes widened, but I felt her breathing speed up like it always did when I did something that aroused her. Any lingering exhaustion fell away as I thought about all the things I wanted to try.

"We might be here a while."

She angled her head up, beckoning me closer.

"That sounds perfect to me."

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading *Sips of Her*. I hope you enjoyed Cameran and Julie's journey to love. These two characters are dear to me, and both represent different points in my life in terms of taking chances and choosing love. I love these two so much that they might have cameos in my upcoming stories. Also, we can't just leave Rod and Sean high and dry. Those two have been dancing around one another for years and clearly, it's time for them to put up or shut up. Keep your eyes peeled for what's coming next!

As always, if you enjoyed this book and others I've written, please consider taking a moment to leave a review. Your support makes my writing possible!

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ABOUT KARMEN LEE

Karmen Lee is an author of diverse and queer adult contemporary and steamy romance. She's a single mom living it up in Atlanta, Georgia with her kid, her cats, and humidity. When she's not carpooling or packing lunches, you can probably find her enjoying a glass of wine and dreaming up ways to show her readers a good time.

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